

A Question of Online Obtaining

Question

Is it considered standard practice to obtain copyright transfer and conflict-of-interest (COI) disclosure from authors via an online manuscript-submission system? Our journal accepts only electronic submissions and our entire editing and peer-review process is carried out with an electronic editing system. It would be easiest and most efficient to obtain copyright transfer and COI disclosure with the same system. Is it acceptable to obtain copyright transfer via a simple "I Agree" button that all the authors click after reading the specific wording of the copyright-transfer agreement online? Similarly, can a COI disclosure be completed online?

Solutions

First, a disclaimer: I am not a lawyer. Unfortunately, there is no pat answer to this question. Journal publishers must balance efficiency and the convenience of authors with the risk of litigation. For those with perceived high-risk exposure, the standard is an ink-on-paper signature; maximal security would require that the signature be notarized. The risk exposure that my organization faces is low enough that we accept either faxed signatures or a scanned PDF of an original signature. Either format readily allows integration with our manuscript-upload system. I would be very concerned about using an "I Agree" button because the potential for abuse, however unlikely, would clearly be increased to a degree that would outweigh the convenience of such a system. In summary, the balance of risk versus convenience is found on a continuum, and the optimal approach varies according to the comfort level of each publisher; we have come to our own decision to allow electronic signatures after many years of inflexibly requiring original signatures in ink. Our authors are delighted! Our production staff is as well.

Ken Heideman

Director of Publications
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A standard practice for journals in science, technology, and medicine has long been to obtain copyright transfer or an author license by requiring hard-copy signatures from all authors or from a corresponding author on behalf of all authors. A growing number of journals—such as some of those published by the American Academy of Neurology, the American Association for Clinical Chemistry, the American Society of Clinical Oncology, the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and Elsevier—have fairly recently begun or are beginning to implement electronic transfer of rights.

Likewise, the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS)* is developing a method to accept copyright transfer during the online submission process. Authors may click a button that says, "I have read the PNAS Copyright Assignment and agree with the terms and conditions expressed therein. PNAS and all authors agree that this agreement will be executed electronically. I warrant that I am an authorized agent for and on behalf of all the authors." Similar buttons will be available for works made for hire and for works of which all authors are US government employees. Our system will record who clicks the button and when, and we will keep these data in perpetuity. Only authorized users are allowed to transfer copyright online.

The electronic system will be much easier than the paper system for authors to complete and for the editorial office to administer. The National Academy of Sciences legal counsel carefully vetted our wording and procedures; the button that authors click may be simple, but the wording and data capture must be precise.

PNAS has accepted disclosure of conflicts of interest from authors during the online submission process since September 2005. We also require that authors indicate their individual contributions to the work during online submission. We publish both conflict-of-interest and author-contribution statements in print and online.

Diane M Sullenberger

Executive Editor
PNAS
Washington, DC

The journal *Pediatrics* is in the process of making it standard practice to collect copyright-transfer forms via our online submission system. Previously, our editorial offices would collect the copyright-transfer forms by fax, mail, or e-mail, and this was typically a heavy administrative burden on staff resources.

Adding the form electronically allows staff to track and view status reports of

the form within the workflow system. The conventional workflow process required corresponding authors to complete the copyright-transfer form on article acceptance. By adding the form to the electronic workflow process, the journal is asking authors to complete the copyright-transfer agreement on submission, but conditionally. If an article is not accepted, *Pediatrics* will turn the copyright back over to the author.

We are not collecting electronic signatures in phase 1 of the project. The corresponding author will download the form, collect the signatures, and upload the form to his or her account. Corresponding authors can log into their account to be assured that the required forms have been received by *Pediatrics* and to monitor the status of their submission.

In phase 2 of our project, the electronic signatures will be collected in the form of a checkbox, in which the corresponding author will type his or her name into a field box and then select a radio button indicating agreement with the terms of the copyright-assignment agreement. *Pediatrics* requires that the corresponding author manage the article-submission requirements.

Joe Puskarz
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Very interesting that you would be posing this question. I imagine that the topic is more urgent for clinical journals. Not sure I have much of an answer, but the issue has recently come up at our journal, too.

We use a Web-based submission and peer-review system (ScholarOne). For dis-

Solution Corner Welcomes New Editor; Proposed Questions Sought for Column

Science Editor happily announces that Kenneth F Heideman has accepted editorship of the Solution Corner column. Heideman, director of publications at the American Meteorological Society, is a member of the *Science Editor* Editorial Board.

If you have questions for possible use in the column, please send them to Ken at kheideman@ametsoc.org. Questions on all aspects of science editing are welcome. Many previous Solution Corner columns can be accessed at www.councilscienceeditors.org/publications/solutioncorner.cfm.

Solution Corner first appeared in 1996 (in *CBE Views*, the forerunner of *Science Editor*). From its inception until 2005, it was edited by Della Mundy. Since then, it has appeared irregularly. Publication of the first Solution Corner column edited by Ken is anticipated for late 2008 or early 2009, but he looks forward to receiving your questions starting now. We are excited about resuming frequent publication of this column!

closure, we've had a checklist for authors that has to be completed before the manuscript could go through. We thought that this was adequate until earlier this year, when we started offering continuing-medical-education credits. Medscape, which handles the credits for us, requires a separate disclosure form that has to be filled out and signed by each author and submitted to us (and then to Medscape) by fax.

ScholarOne can actually add a separate disclosure form for us and allow electronic signatures of authors. However, this can be a problem for authors who have no facility for submitting electronic signatures. And it would not resolve our cumbersome fax issues, because Medscape does not accept electronic signatures.

The issue of copyright permission is also not the same for all journals. Individual legal departments have to decide what

kind of submission of copyright they find legally binding (for example, electronic signatures or faxed signatures). Again, Web-based systems can provide the forms but do not get involved in the legalities.

My view is that eventually electronic submissions of this information will become standard. Not sure I understand, for example, why a faxed signature is any more authentic than an electronic one. Also, the argument that in electronic submission it is not certain who actually submits the disclosure does not really hold water. Do we know who really submits the manuscript? No. Yet, we assume it is the (corresponding) author.

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