

# The Ethics of Editing: Report from the COPE Seminar 2009

## Frances Mulvany

Hot on the heels of its relaunched Web site ([publicationethics.org](http://publicationethics.org)), COPE (the Committee on Publication Ethics) held its annual seminar on 27 March 2009 in London. In his last opening address as chairman before Liz Wager took over the helm, Harvey Marcovitch highlighted the challenges that COPE faces with its rapidly expanding membership.

The committee, founded in 1997 as a forum for journal editors to discuss breaches in publication ethics, initially comprised mainly editors of medical journals. It now finds itself having to adapt to the inclusion of journals in a broad spectrum of disciplines, including 17 astrophysics and 20 law journals, after the incorporation of all Elsevier titles in 2008.

Changes announced for the year ahead include the first US COPE seminar, to be held in November this year; new retraction flowcharts; and the introduction of the COPE newsletter, a "publication with personality" edited by Jeannie Wurz, which seeks to update COPE members on current developments.

## The Editor's Enemies

John Hoey, of Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada, former editor-in-chief of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, introduced the ethics of editing with an entertaining overview of the "mischief, malfeasance, and incompetence" faced by editors. Commenting on the responsibility of an editor as stipulated by COPE<sup>1</sup> to "preclude business needs from compromising intellectual standards", Hoey outlined the obligation that an editor has to be aware of the source of funding for

the journal owners. He proposed a more explicit contract between editors and journal owners. It should specifically mention the editor's obligation to comply with the Helsinki declaration<sup>2</sup> and should clearly state the publisher's goals. Disclosing details of this contract and publicly declaring the editor's and publisher's financial conflicts of interest would improve transparency and be fairer to authors.

In an ideal world, Hoey suggested, financial conflicts of interest would be removed from the equation. A case in point is *Open Medicine*, a journal launched with the explicit aim of removing the potential for financial conflicts.<sup>3</sup> It is run collaboratively by part-time editors using an open-source peer-review system without author charges or advertising revenue. It was initially successful, but whether this model will be viable in the long term in light of such logistical challenges as the hunt for volunteer copyeditors remains to be seen.

Hoey also discussed the challenge of maintaining the integrity of the scientific record. While conceding that such issues as reporting bias can be easily overlooked by journals, he explained the potentially wide-reaching implications of publishing a paper with an outcome bias, citing the recent investigation by Dickersin that attributes a large number of Neurontin prescriptions to a disputed paper.<sup>4</sup> To avoid publishing biased results, journals should insist that authors conform to reporting standards, such as the CONSORT statement,<sup>5</sup> whereby authors provide the appropriate checklist with their manuscript submission. (Some journals are taking that a step further in requiring data-sharing statements and trying to establish best practices for publishing raw clinical data in peer-reviewed journals.<sup>6,7</sup>) Authors should be making use of resources, such as the Equator Network,<sup>8</sup> that document guidelines for reporting studies of a wide array of types.

## Editorial Professionalism

The different ethical concerns faced by small journals were introduced for discussion by the second speaker, Behrooz Astaneh, editor of the *Iranian Journal of Medical Sciences*. A small journal can be defined as one with low circulation and long publication intervals; it is often a purely academic journal run on a small budget. Small journals frequently struggle with editorial independence, and closer relationships between authors and editors may lead to bias. Astaneh commented that editorial board members are more influential on small journals and that often their editors come to the job without experience in the publishing process. He identified professionalism as the key to maintaining publication ethics.

Using his home country of Iran as an example, Astaneh commented that most editors have sparse knowledge of ethical concerns. They also face language barriers: Most literature is published in English, and it is difficult to spot such problems as plagiarism without a good command of the English language. To counteract that, workshops are being run for many editors, and a master's degree in medical journalism has been introduced. The suggestion was made that COPE provide an online distance-learning course to educate less-experienced editors about publication ethics.

## A Non (Bio) Medical Point of View

Covering territory that was somewhat unfamiliar to most of the audience, Randall Stephenson, editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Geodynamics* and a recent addition to the COPE Council, introduced ethical concerns faced by nonbiomedical journals. He explained the setup of his journal and how it fits the model of a small journal, agreeing with Astaneh that there should be no difference between small and large journals in how ethical problems are dealt with.

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## COPE continued

In the geodynamics field, there is much less scope for competing interests in that research is often based on public data with the “added value” coming from innovative modeling approaches, and it is therefore not standard practice to ask authors to disclose competing interests. Members of the audience questioned that; for example, oil companies funding geodynamic research could be seen as a potential conflict.

In his 2-year stint as editor-in-chief, the ethical issues that Stephenson has faced have involved authorship disputes and competitive acts by reviewers. They range from unhelpful reviews to the apparently deliberate acceptance of a reviewing assignment in order to disparage a competitor. He suggested that such harmful reviewer acts could be alleviated with a double-blind review policy. However, it may be problematic in creating the side effect of increasing the difficulty of finding reviewers.

Stephenson concluded that ethical issues for nonbiomedical journals are more closely linked to the peer-review policy because there is less reason for researchers to commit research fraud.

### Is Ethics a Luxury for Small Journals?

The final session of the day, presented by Margaret Rees, editor of *Maturitas*, continued the day’s theme by focusing on how well small journals are placed to deal with ethical problems. Rees felt strongly that all journals have the same ethical remit regardless of their size.

A recent *Nature* article reported that “scientific misconduct may be more prevalent than most researchers would like to admit.”<sup>9</sup> That suggests that editors of small journals will face the same issues as their colleagues at larger journals, but they can be at a disadvantage when approaching these problems inasmuch as their much smaller number of manuscripts means that they are likely to have less experience with ethical issues. The editor, who may be working alone and be untrained in publication ethics, frequently will also have to contend with regular employment, which can make it all too easy to overlook misconduct. There is also the argument that authors may be more likely to risk the discovery of their misconduct when submitting to a smaller journal because they feel that there is less probability that it will be noticed. Retraction, in particular, is rare in small journals, in that legal advice is often needed and a small journal may not have the resources to investigate fully.

Rees commented that “editors of small journals are on a tightrope” facing the same problems as larger journals with little support or resources. Expanding the editorial board and reviewer base and having clearly defined instructions for authors may help prevent ethical problems. Rees argued that vigilance is needed by editors and that they should be prepared to take action when misconduct occurs.

As has become the tradition for the COPE seminar, the sessions were interspersed with useful workshops in which groups discussed past COPE cases. The

take-home message of the day was that all editors, irrespective of their journal size, are obliged to consider ethical issues. Opportunities like the COPE seminar, in which editors can discuss these issues, continue to be valuable. 

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