

Establishing Rules for Ethicists and Ethics Organizations in Academic Publishing to Avoid Conflicts of Interest, Favoritism, Cronyism and Nepotism

KOME – An International Journal of Pure
Communication Inquiry
Volume 7 Issue 1, p. 110-125.
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Published by the Hungarian Communication
Studies Association
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.75698.87

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Abstract: A proliferation of publication venues, scholarly journals, use of social media to disseminate knowledge and research results, scientific information, increased international scientific collaboration, a move towards open knowledge and data sharing, recent scandals such as journal editors' coercive citations, fake peer review, peer review rings, data fabrication, research spin, and retraction of articles, several of the latter within the emergence of a post publication peer review movement, are some of the many reasons why publishing ethics are constantly evolving. These challenges have led to the birth of an increasing number of guidelines and recommendations being issued by multiple organizations and committees around the world in light of the recognized need to salvage peer review, and in an attempt to restore eroding trust in science, scientists and their publications. The principal objective of these guidelines and recommendations is supposedly to provide guidance for editors, reviewers and authors to conduct honest and ethical research and publishing practices, including responsible authorship and editorship, conflict of interest management, maintaining the confidentiality of peer review, and other ethical issues that arise in conducting and reporting research. Despite the fact that scholarly publishing is an international enterprise with global impact, current guidelines and recommendations appear to fall very short on imposing any

Acknowledgements: The authors thank Yann Bramoullé (Aix-Marseille School of Economics & GREQAM, Aix-Marseille University, France) and Jone L. Pearce (The Paul Merage School of Business, University of California, USA) for insightful feedback, balanced critique and comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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Article received on the 19th January, 2019. *Article accepted* on the 15th May, 2019.

Conflict of Interest: The first author has been critical of several aspects related to COPE and has questioned the ICMJE in public. VK served, until 2011, as the Research Integrity Editor in the Croatian Medical Journal and as the president of the Croatian national Committee for Ethics in Science and Higher Education. Since 2015, VK has served as an ethics expert for the evaluation of FP7 and H2020 projects with the European Commission. The authors declare no other conflicts of interest.

obligations on their parent members, i.e., committee members who issue guidelines and recommend solutions for ethical dilemmas especially when such organizations are dependent on commercial publishers who may be paying members. Obviously, financial incentives indicate that ethical organizations or ethicists are not in a power position compared to editors or publishers. Imbalanced guidelines risk that hidden conflicts of interest, cronyism, or nepotism may corrupt the decision-making process or the ethical hierarchy that has been put into place to safe-guard research and publishing ethics. Therefore, the ethics gate-keepers to the integrity of scholarly publishing should also be carefully scrutinized, and strict ethical guidelines have to be imposed on them as equally as their rules are imposed on global academia to avoid the risk of further corrupting the scientific process as a result of the absence of strong exterior regulation or oversight. This theoretical paper highlights signs of favoritism and cronyism in ethics. It also offers proposals for rules (limitations and consequences) to avoid them in science publishing. Our guidelines should be used by academics in the position of authors or editors who may sense, perceive or detect abuses of power among ethicists.

Keywords: organization ethics; ethical dilemmas; corruption; conflict of interest