

# How to COPE with issues in publication ethics

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Consider this scenario: as an editor of a scholarly journal, you are informed that an anonymous blogger has publicly accused your journal of publishing an article with allegedly numerous ethical violations and acts of misconduct from 20 years before you became editor. Your journal has no archives or records from that long ago, but you are being contacted by current authors and the media to respond. Who ya gonna call? If you are one of the approximately 11,500 members of a voluntary organization called COPE (the [Committee on Publication Ethics](#)), that's probably who you'll call.

COPE began in 1997 with an informal meeting of a small number of U.K. editors of medical journals who were looking for a mechanism to exchange views on issues of publication ethics. COPE is a U.K. registered charity which is governed by a board of trustees and represented by a larger council of members, all of whom volunteer their time to support and deliver the various services which COPE provides. COPE's principal objective is "to educate and advance knowledge in methods of safeguarding the integrity of the scholarly record for the benefit of the public."

The membership of COPE is largely editors-in-chief and publishers of learned journals, although the organization is currently piloting a project for universities to become members. The organization fulfills its remit by providing leadership in thinking about publication ethics, along with practical resources to educate and support COPE members and the public.

COPE holds periodic seminars and workshops in the U.S., the U.K., Europe and elsewhere on various topics related to publication ethics. This past March, COPE hosted its [first workshop](#) on plagiarism, authorship and peer review in China, in Beijing. The organization provides flowcharts for responding to allegations of publication wrongdoing for editors and publishers, and also develops and disseminates discussion papers, policy frameworks and codes of best practices. As well, a number of forums are held each year where members can submit cases for advice from the members attending. These cases are subsequently anonymized in a website database which is publicly and freely available for all to read. COPE publishes an online newsletter and mediates disputes between authors and our member journals and publishers.

The age of digitization has further complicated an already complex landscape. Clearly, the internet has played a role in facilitating misconduct. As well, more recently, questions about who owns peer review have become more public through the internet and that topic is the subject of a [recent COPE discussion paper](#) (PDF). This is just one of the many issues currently confounding editors of scholarly journals. Then there is the issue of predatory journals.

This past January, *University Affairs* writer [Alex Gillis stated](#) that many of the members of COPE are predatory journals. COPE respectfully disagrees. There have been two occasions when there were members of COPE identified on the former Beall's List which contained Mr. Beall's assessment of possible, potential and probable predatory journals. One of these cases caused significant division among academicians about its accuracy. In each of the two cases, COPE did a detailed investigation and concluded that the member met its criteria for membership in the organization as legitimate adherents of its standards for ethical publication.

As a voluntary organization, COPE is always willing to investigate allegations and will correct any errors that emerge. However, over the past 20 years, the volunteer-run membership committee has evolved and strengthened its criteria for membership. In fact, we developed the "[Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing](#)" in collaboration with the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association and the Directory of Open Access Journals. This rigorous set of guidelines directs our activities in accepting new members.

Digitization has resulted in more transparency and more scrutiny of academic publications and generally that is all to the good. The pressure, however, from third-party, post-publication blog reviews has added an additional stressor and burden, particularly on small independent or academic society journals with volunteer editors, editorial boards and peer reviewers. The open access debate has many advocates and is challenging the tradition of large, commercial academic publishers, many of which are trying to negotiate a middle ground between profitability and access. Again, this is a complex ethical issue within an ethical terrain.

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