

# Addressing ethical issues in peer review – new guidelines available from COPE



*Ethical issues related to the peer review process are increasingly complex and can be tricky to navigate and resolve. This [Peer Review Week 2017](#), COPE (the Committee on Publication Ethics) released a revised, updated version of its guidelines for editors, reviewers, and would-be reviewers. These expanded resources include more information for early-career researchers, as well as addressing some of the more prominent recent ethical issues of peer review, such as peer review fraud, confidentiality, and ownership.*

Although it seems that much of the activity related to publication ethics is reactionary, there is something to be said for being proactive. This is especially true when issues in publication ethics reoccur across the wide spectrum of the publishing landscape. Preventing problems may not always eliminate them entirely, but certainly can reduce the incidence. We find this to be true of the recurring problems related to peer review. And [Peer Review Week](#) is an ideal time to think back and evaluate how our approaches to issues around peer review have evolved.

COPE (the Committee on Publication Ethics) has long been involved in helping editors and publishers manage problems around the thorny issues of publication ethics. Formed in 1997 by a small group of journal editors, COPE now has over 11,000 members worldwide from all academic fields. A key feature of COPE has been the quarterly Forum, where members can bring individual cases, via webinar, for discussion and collective advice from other members in attendance. All of the forum cases from 1997 onwards have been entered into a [searchable database](#), together with advice and follow-up, providing a valuable resource.

It is evident from the database that variations on several problems have recurred. In 2013, Hames et al. analysed 16 years of COPE cases and created a 100-word [taxonomy](#) developed to standardise the categorisation of cases. This allows users to search for cases related to particular issues (including peer review) which continue to accumulate, driving development of COPE resources and partnerships with other groups.

The [COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers](#), the first COPE resource specifically created with a focus on peer review, published in 2013. In directly speaking to potential issues peer reviewers may face, COPE intended to “provide helpful guidance to researchers, be a reference for journals and editors in guiding their reviewers, and act as an educational resource for institutions in training their students and researchers”. Since 2013, our continued research into the cases specifically related to peer review has shown that issues within peer review have become increasingly complex. There are also different models, and platforms, for facilitating peer review. The guidelines have therefore been recently [revised](#) and updated for release during Peer Review Week 2017. They expand on the original by including more information for early career researchers, as well as addressing some of the new ethical issues that have emerged such as peer review fraud. The revision benefited from valuable feedback on the format and approach from [COPE's initiative](#) working collaboratively with institutional members. Peer review is not always a linear task and the context in which a reviewer performs a review is an important consideration.

Confidentiality and ownership are also crucial issues in peer review and we have also recently revised COPE's discussion document on [Who 'owns' peer reviews?](#). In recognising that undertaking peer review can be a complex and daunting task, a new infographic on peer review [summarises some of the issues](#) to consider when agreeing to undertake peer review. In addressing some of the emerging challenges in peer review for our members, we have created a new flowchart to assist editors in recognising situations where the [peer review process may potentially have been manipulated](#). Of course, debating the issues in publication ethics is central to COPE's values and COPE facilitates this via webinars. As part of Peer Review Week activities we will be having a discussion around some of the topical issues in peer review that are faced by COPE members via [webinar](#) on Thursday 14 September (4-5pm BST).

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As COPE celebrates its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, we continue to be inspired by our members, and the 20 years of questions, answers, and debate they've contributed to COPE. Our volunteer COPE Council Members give freely of their time to support COPE in achieving its mission: promoting integrity in research and its publication. We look forward to future discussions and collective problem-solving that is at the heart of COPE, to evolve, develop guidance and serve the communities we represent.

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

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