
Book review

Best Practice Guidelines on Publishing Ethics: a Publisher's Perspective

John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. 2014. 53pp. CC BY-NC 4.0 (also available in an html version at <http://exchanges.wiley.com/ethicsguidelines> with fully functional links to references and other resources)



This document is a full update of Wiley's publication ethics guidelines. These guidelines are intended by Wiley to support everyone involved in scholarly publishing by summarizing the best practice guidance from leading organizations around the world. The guidelines are compiled and organized by a panel of contributors from a diverse range of disciplines and geographic regions.

The guidelines are indeed impressively comprehensive. They cover all aspects of publication ethics whether these aspects are primarily relevant to authors, to editors, reviewers, funders or information providers. The material is largely summarized from existing multinational and multidisciplinary bodies including the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) and Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). Unfortunately, EASE is not mentioned.

The first section deals with misconduct, its identification, and how it can be dealt with. There are paragraphs on whistle blowing, fabrication, falsification, image manipulation, plagiarism, and duplicate and redundant publication. Further paragraphs provide guidelines for the ethical treatment of animals and humans in research, for maintaining privacy and confidentiality, and for sensitivity to culture and heritage.

The second section covers editorial standards and processes, authorship and authorship disputes, peer review processes, and several allied topics.

Of particular utility in these guidelines is that the descriptions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour are usually accompanied by an indication of how unacceptable behaviour is detected, what action should be taken when it is, and who should take this action. These indications are very usefully supported by the reproduction of the COPE

flowcharts (detailing actions to be taken in circumstances such as the detection of fraud) and COPE's specimen letters (providing pro-forma responses to the detection of unethical behaviour in publication).

These guidelines also contain a list of numerous sources of information on publication ethics, of subject-specific and country-specific ethics watchdogs, and of protocols for ensuring good reporting practices and transparency.

There is, in fact, very little to fault in these guidelines. It is very useful to have all this information brought together so economically into a single document. Of course, other single sources on this subject exist, but these guidelines from Wiley fill an otherwise unaddressed niche. This is because they are produced by a panel from many disciplines and many regions. This is not true for many other bodies. The ICJME guidelines for example cover the same wide range of topics and the ICJME panel contains representatives from many regions. However, it draws mainly from the biomedical sciences and so doesn't have the multidisciplinary authority that these guidelines from Wiley do. The Office of Research Integrity covers many disciplines but has a strong USA focus.

It is somewhat depressing that a publisher should produce such a widely applicable set of guidelines in such a convenient concise form. But they are certainly to be congratulated for doing so.

However, I don't think that the ethical problems in academic publishing, or even in science publishing, occur because of a lack of guidelines. They occur because the guidelines are unknown, or because they are ignored.

I teach publication ethics to young scientists, 200–300 of them every year, and not only have they never heard of any ethical guidelines but very often neither have their supervisors or the organizers of their courses. And while preparing this review I checked the instructions to authors for several Wiley science journals. None of them mentioned the Wiley guidelines – although, to be fair, some did link to the ICMJE or to similar bodies. And leafing through various Wiley journals turns up published papers that don't appear to have fully transparent methodologies, which suggests that editors and reviewers are not implementing these guidelines. Not that these are problems limited to Wiley of course. It's the same for other academic publishers.

However, publication of guidelines – even guidelines as inclusive and as well presented as these from Wiley – just isn't enough. They have to be implemented, and that's up to all of us in academic publishing: authors, editors, reviewers, as well as the publishers.

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