

***The Scholarly Kitchen Podcast:
Talking Publication Ethics
Transcript of 15 July 2015 show***

Stewart Wills (host): Welcome to The Scholarly Kitchen Podcast for July 15th, 2015. I'm Stewart Wills. It's been an eventful couple of months in the area of scientific ethics and integrity, with some highly publicized retractions of research; the fourth edition of the World Conference on Research Integrity, which took place in Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of June; and, just recently, some new guidelines from publishers, academics, and others on research transparency and reproducibility. To talk a bit about this, we're delighted to have Charlotte Haug, the vice-chair of the Council on Publication Ethics, or COPE, on the line. Charlotte, thanks for being with us.

Charlotte Haug: Thank you for having me.

SW: Before we dive into the discussion could you just talk a little bit about what COPE does and some background on the organization.

CH: Yes. So COPE, the Committee on Publication Ethics, is really an education forum for editors and publishers. We started less than twenty years ago as a very small group of editors meeting then in London, and over the last ten, fifteen years this organization has grown enormously. We had forty journals in 2000, and now we have more than fifteen thousand.

SW: That *is* remarkable

CH: It's remarkable, but it has to be said, though, that one reason for this fantastic number of journals is of course that we had some of the largest publishers sign up. It's not like every single editor has signed up. But we are trying, as hard as we can, to stay, in a way, the way we've always been. So we're trying to provide advice and education on all aspects really of publication ethics, and in particular how to handle cases of research and publication misconduct. And editors and publishers who are members have a forum to discuss actual individual cases with us. We have different formats for that; we have webinars, we have different kinds of, now, everything on the net, of course, where we meet and discuss

And we do not investigate cases but we encourage editors to help the institutions investigate cases of misconduct. And all COPE members are expected to follow the codes of conduct for journal editors and publishers. So in a way we are little bit surprised ourselves at how big the organization has become. But it is still voluntary; nobody is paid to be on the council or as an officer. But we will try to provide education, first and foremost, and advice in this very rapidly changing world of publication and science.

SW: All right, well, let's talk a bit about an event that I mentioned at the outset, which is the World Conference on Research Integrity. This was the fourth conference, as I mentioned, and it seemed in a way like the timing was almost serendipitous; it immediately followed the very highly publicized retraction case of a *Science* paper by Michael LaCour and Donald Green on

attitude change toward same-sex marriage. I guess that must have given people a lot to talk about at that meeting.

CH: Yes and no, I would say—I mean, it's absolutely a very interesting and, unfortunately, typical case, but I wouldn't say that that case was talked about a lot. But it was definitely used as an example in all the workshops dealing with retractions, dealing with how research should be conducted, really. And all these cases are of course special, but at the same time, when we look at the cases like this one that you mention, it gets a lot of publicity of course because it is published in a journal like *Science*. But when we look at all the journals, we see that this is the typical rejection case in a way. It just doesn't get all that publicity. And of course we understand why get so much publicity—because we still have a hierarchy of journals, and rightly so, and when *Science* publishes something like this, you sort of expect them to have done all of the checks, more than maybe a tiny little journal in Asia.

SW: Well one thing I noticed about the conference this year, or least in looking at some of the conference materials, was there seemed to be a particular focus on the, kind of system of incentives and rewards built into science, and how, you know, we might be able to nudge that system to, you know, toward better promoting research integrity. What were some of the main sort of themes on that issue?

CH: Yes, well that that was actually the main theme of this year's conference—the systems around research. And we would hope to have systems with incentives that nudged toward promoting researching integrity. But in the first place we just need to get rid of those systems that are, you know, working in the opposite direction—actually nudging the researchers to misconduct or at least just slightly unethical behavior. Because it is so easy to make a little bit of a shortcut so that you can get your paper published, with everything that that means. In all countries now, I think, all over the world, the journal article has become sort of a currency—for promotions, for getting money to your department, for your career. And it was never meant to be that. And that one type of incentive is it working a little bit differently in different countries, but when we know that if you get, just get the publication, it will help you, and if you get the publication in a top-ranking journal, it will mean a lot of money, lots of things for your career—we can easily see how that is not promoting the kind of research integrity that we're looking for. And that, I think, was the main thing in very different ways that we discussed at this, this year's conference.

SW: Was there anything in particular in the conference that, that you felt was particularly interesting in terms of how to change the system to, you know, more in the direction of research integrity?

CH: I think the most important thing about this conference was that it was a truly international conference this time. It has been a world conference before. I was not at the first two; they were sort of by invitation only. I was in Montreal two years ago, and now here, there in Rio. And this year I had the feeling that we had—not all of the world, but at least most parts of the world represented, which is extremely important. Because research is of course a global thing, and the scientific record is created globally, and we all depend on each others' work in that way. And to have both, you know, people representing the authorities and politicians from China from Latin

America, and of course also from Europe and the U.S., and so on, talking quite openly about the problems that we have in the research—that made me very optimistic. Because it's already—that means that we can sort of handle things. If it's all under the carpet, and we don't want to talk about it, it's so much more difficult. So that made me very optimistic actually; so now we're talking.

I mean, COPE was involved with, over the last few months, in the new kind of scientific misconduct, which is the peer reviewers that are just, you know, fake, and created. And so far it has looked like it is a problem, you know, coming from China. And we haven't really talked openly about that, but the Chinese actually talked about that, you know? And that, I think, is very, very encouraging. Because it made me think that we can make some progress here, because we all have to sort of agree here that we have some problems before we can do something about it.

SW: Yeah. Well let's, you know, let's look at other potential solutions or ideas that are being floated at this scene a bit more broadly. A few weeks ago, a new set of guidelines was published in *Science* magazine; this was the work of around thirty scientists and publishers to try to promote openness and transparency. What can you tell me about your thoughts on those guidelines and the impact that they might have?

CH: Well, so those guidelines are setting up ways that journals can help making science more open and transparent, in different, you know, specific ways—for example, how they can have policies in their journals so that, for example, data can be shared, or code can be shared, if that's the type of article we're talking about. That's the type of thing that the *Science* guidelines are looking at. And I think—I like the way they have set it up, really. They made it not like, “you have to be with us or against us,” in a way; they have made sort of a three or four different ways, more and more strict, that the journals could encourage this transparency. And I think they can have an impact.

Data sharing has been sort of the most discussed over the last few years in all journals, I think, but also sharing of code, and how we can, in a way, get back to the old system of research, where this was actually the norm—that when you publish something, it should be possible to replicate what you did, based on what was published. And then we realized that, you know, usually there is a lot of stuff that's *not* in the article, such as the raw data or the data code that you're using, or the genes, or the laboratory material that you're using to get your results. And this is a way of trying to get back to that. Because science must be replicated to be true. And just seeing that that it's not, it's just not happening, and very often cannot happen based on what's published now.

SW: And I guess COPE also has its own set of guidelines, the Principles of Transparency and Best Practices in Scholarly Publishing, which it co-publishes with a number of other organizations.

CH: Yeah. So those are actually a little bit, slightly different sets of guidelines, and that has to do with the enormous increase in journals over the last few years. And COPE and some other organizations for journals has had some problems with membership. Because we really, we encourage people to be members so that we can educate; at the same time we want them to be

real journals. And that's really what those principles are about. We have decided not to make sort of a "blacklist" of journals that we didn't think were real journals. Instead, we wanted to make principles of transparency and best practice—sort of, What does it mean, what is the minimum set of criteria you have to meet to call yourself a journal? And that's what they are all about. And it's really . . . I think everybody in science knows about these journals that pop up all over the place. And it's too easy to say that everything is just bad, because it's just some of isn't; you know, some of it is actually new countries, new people trying to just set up journals. And we all started in one place; everything cannot be professional in the beginning. So not everything that looks sort of, a little bit amateurish is fake or wrong, you know. So there are some minimum sets of criteria, and that's what this is about.

SW: All right, well, I'd like to sort of move toward the end here by talking about a few sort of larger questions. I mean, you alluded earlier to the fact that sometimes people look at these things differently in different countries; I've certainly noticed that what constitutes plagiarism is sometimes considered very differently in different parts of the world. There seem to be so many gray areas here—will publishers really be able to, you know, to act as the policeman on this? What do you think really *is* the publisher's role in policing misconduct?

CH: Well, I think we're not really police, but we can of course use the word in the sense that, yes, we have the responsibility to try to secure that what we publish is good it can be—you know, that is the role of the publisher or editor. And we have a role to correct and retract. Those things are our responsibilities. And so when you talk about the differences in different countries—for example, when you speak about plagiarism, I'm not sure, you know, that that we think so differently about this. It also has to do with the English as the current common scientific language. And so many people all over the world do not have English as their first language, not even the majority of those who publish. And there *is* a prejudice, when you get the manuscript to one of the, you know, prestigious journals and it's not perfect English, it is a tendency that those manuscripts are sort of not, maybe, considered in the same way.

So what many non-native English speakers are saying is that, Well, you know, we find a paragraph that is really, really well written, and we use that paragraph because it looks more professional. But often it is also just an excuse for real plagiarism, which we do not accept, I don't think, in any country. Another thing that came up at the World Conference that were different in different countries were the concept of authorship. That I found quite interesting. Because in our part of the world we have been sort of agreeing for some years now that you should not—you should be a real author, you know, to be on the paper, and that the head of the lab, for example, has no place there if he or she hasn't really authored the paper and fulfilling the authorship criteria. Well, we had speakers from the Islamic world, for example, who said that that would be considered terrible in their countries, not to include the head of the institution on paper—it would be very impolite, and very much against the culture of science. And I can sort of see where they're getting at.

And we have to take this into account. I think the same will be true if we really talk to Chinese authors, that we have to look now at the different cultures and take into account that—we have to acknowledge that the guidelines and rules *are* very Western—*our* sort of ethics. And maybe, you

know, the next phase now will be to people to really understand a little bit more about the cultural differences and how that will influence this particular aspect.

SW: That's very interesting. You know, one of the trends that seems to have given rise to a lot of these concerns has been the increase in retractions—what seems to be a rather significant increase, documented increase in retractions. We've heard suggestions that the number of papers retracted annually is up 25 percent over the past five years and maybe tenfold or more over the past fifteen years. How do you judge this—is this because we have better tools for identifying problems, or is it—or does it reflect something different about the way science is being done now, or maybe some combination, you know, thinking about the incentives that you talked about earlier?

CH: I think maybe, you know, a combination here. Because it's a little bit how you look at the numbers, too—because the retractions are up but so are, you know, publications. I was looking at this for one of the talks I gave there, and I could see that, you know, the increase in publications is really actually quite constant over the last hundred years or so. It's just that we now have so much more. What is what is really changing is the participation from different countries all over the world. You know, it's that that's really changing. And I think that the electronic age, I mean, the Internet, has really changed so much. It makes it so much easier to see, you know, for example, plagiarism. And very often the reason we catch plagiarism is not because you have some fancy software, but because the original author sees his or her own article, you know, in print—either in the review phase or actually online, you know.

And so, yes I think, you know, it's much easier to find and identify before publication and after. And I'm not sure that the retractions are going up that much. What I see, and that is something that worries me a little bit, is that calls for retraction when it really should be a correction has increased. This is something we've been seeing in COPE. And I think it's very important that retractions are used for what retractions should be—I mean, either because the whole paper is flawed, because you made an error, or there's misconduct. But you should not retract just because you disagree, for example. We see we see this now, that this paper isn't—it's no longer valid. I mean science is made up of, you know—

SW: Well that's a really interesting observation. Do you have any thoughts on why that might be happening?

CH: Well, in a way—I mean, this is just my own personal opinion from working with this—is that, in a way, it's like the real sort of culture of scientific debate is—at least in medicine, which is my field—is, it's almost like, it has to be true or untrue that . . . the very natural thing that I met in my early career and so that, of course, you know things will—you do something and then later somebody else comes along and figures out that this this wasn't correct, and then we move on, you know? Now there are all these debates about, “This paper should be retracted because it will, sort of, mislead the public if it is left standing.” And this is something that actually worries me a little bit because this is . . . And editors are pressured to retract because, sometimes even the publisher or lawyers say that, “Well, O.K., we cannot, you know, risk a court case here,” or something. And I really think that retractions are actually a good thing—you know, to me. I have been an editor for many years. And whether it is because it's just an honest error, or it is because

there has been misconduct, I mean, it is really a good thing for the scientific record that what should be retracted *is* retracted. And it shouldn't be used for other things like punishment or trying to stop the scientific debate.

So I think the whole discussion around retractions will continue, because we have a period now where retraction has been you know sort of little like a sensation, almost, when there is a retraction. To me it is a very normal thing—you know, it's not something that's nice when you have to do it, especially when the authors don't agree. But it is a very natural part of what the journal has to do. And we should look at it as something that is a good thing, actually, to correct the literature, and not like a very sensational thing.

In a way, science is responding to the world around it. And maybe we are, in a way, expecting too much of science—expecting it to sort of solve big problems very quickly in, you know, spectacular breakthroughs. And if we could sort of “slow science down,” both for the scientists themselves and in the eyes of the public, I think that would be a very good thing.

SW: Charlotte Haug, thanks very much.

CH: Thank you so much.

SW: And thank you for dropping in to The Scholarly Kitchen podcast for July 15th, 2015. Be sure to visit scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org, where, every day, some of the sharpest minds in scholarly publishing detail, discuss, and debate the trends shaping the business. You can also comment on this podcast episode on its blog page, and we'd love to hear from you. Thanks to the Society for Scholarly Publishing for its support of this project, and for hosting our audio files, and to the American Association for the Advancement of Science for use of its studio and production facilities. This is Stewart Wills from The Optical Society; until next time, on behalf of SSP and all of the chefs of The Scholarly Kitchen . . . *bon appétit!*