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Teaser Copy

Traditionally the province of rogue individuals, academic misconduct has entered a new era in which third parties are exploiting submission loopholes to manipulate the peer review process. Consequently, authors should be aware that not all editorial service providers operate within the bounds of accepted ethical standards. In reaction, the editorial services industry is launching a new initiative to institute operational guidelines for editorial service providers.

Full Article

In March 2015, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) released an alarming statement regarding the manipulation of the peer review process by third parties. In preparing the statement, a group of publishers, including Wolters Kluwer, shared with COPE their experiences that had led to the retraction of hundreds of articles over the previous 6 months across the industry. In short, editorial services companies, who had made promises of acceptance to authors, were manipulating loopholes in the submission process to execute a plan that came to be referred to as the "fake reviewer scam."

The Fake Reviewer Scam

Online submission systems (e.g., Editorial Manager, ScholarOne, Manuscript Central) have been enormously important to the growth of academic publishing. For those who can recall the days of submitting three hard copy versions of a manuscript to a journal office, receiving review requests via fax, and tracking manuscript progress in Excel, these systems have made it possible for journals to effectively manage thousands of submissions a year with minimal support staff. These systems often contain functions that make it easier for editors to find reviewers and speed up the review process to satisfy the needs of authors. One such function is the option to allow authors to suggest reviewers during the submission process.

While this may seem counterintuitive, many journals used this option for entirely legitimate purposes: to build the pool of reviewers for future submissions, and in rare cases where reviewers prove particularly difficult to find. In the past, it was assumed that any misconduct involving suggested reviewers would center on conflict of interest, i.e., an author who suggested a colleague who would have a personal interest in providing a bias review. The "fake reviewer scam" involves something far more devious.

1. An editorial services company submits a manuscript on behalf of a customer.

2. During the submission process, the editorial services company provides the names of suggested reviewers.
3. The suggested reviewers are real people at real institutions, who appear to be appropriate reviewers for the submitted manuscript. However, the email addresses provided for the suggested reviewers are fake. Rather than an institutional email address (i.e., one that ends in '.edu'), the email address provided is often a gmail.com or yahoo.com address. The accounts can be created in minutes by anyone, and the editorial services company exploits this to create phony accounts using the names of real faculty members.
4. If the journal decides to use one of the suggested reviewers, the review request email goes to the fake account, and consequently, the editorial services company is now in a position to review its own submission.

The good news for journals is that the solution to this issue is simple: Turn off the "suggested reviewers" option. However, from an author's standpoint – and it remains unknown to what extent the authors themselves are aware that this is occurring – it is vital that they are able to determine whether an editorial services company is acting responsibly in providing services, or whether it actively engages in these forms of misconduct. Similarly, reputable editorial services companies have great incentive to root out and expose the companies that are threatening to soil the reputation of their industry.

Coalition for Responsible Publication Resources (CRPR)

Partially in response to the growing number of incidents involving academic misconduct and disreputable editorial services companies, a group of industry leaders launched the Coalition (www.rprcoalition.org) for the following purpose:

> The intent of the Coalition is to supplement the ongoing efforts of other organizations by providing a means for academic scholars to identify, at "point-of-service", vendors that are recognized as conducting themselves and providing services in alignment with current publishing guidelines and ethical practices, as certified through an audit process and follow-up periods of validation and verification of adherence to a core set of sustained industry best practices, as identified by the Coalition.

In practice, the Coalition would provide authors and publishers with assurance that an editorial services company was legitimate by providing a "verifiable and dynamic badge." This badge would appear on an organization's website and be dynamically linked to information acquired by the Coalition during the vetting process. While membership in the Coalition is on a voluntary basis, it is hoped that authors would see the badge as a determining factor in whether or not to use a particular editorial services company, and that over time, the implementation and compliance with industry best practices becomes an operational standard for all editorial services companies.

Summary

Much of the peer review process and its tools are built on the assumption that everyone interacting with them is doing so in good faith. When an author is asked to attest to conflict of interest or non-duplication, editorial offices and publishers assume that the answer provided is an honest one. The

recent issues regarding unsavory editorial service providers are of such great concern because they violate this understanding, and ultimately not only are the journals and publishers impacted, but the authors and their professional reputations are at stake. The industry itself will aid authors' decision-making through the further development of the Coalition for Responsible Publication Resources, while Wolters Kluwer has partnered with Editage to create Wolters Kluwer Author Services (http://wkauthorservices.editage.com/).