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DISCUSSION DOCUMENT:

**DEALING WITH CONCERNS ABOUT THE  
INTEGRITY OF PUBLISHED RESEARCH**

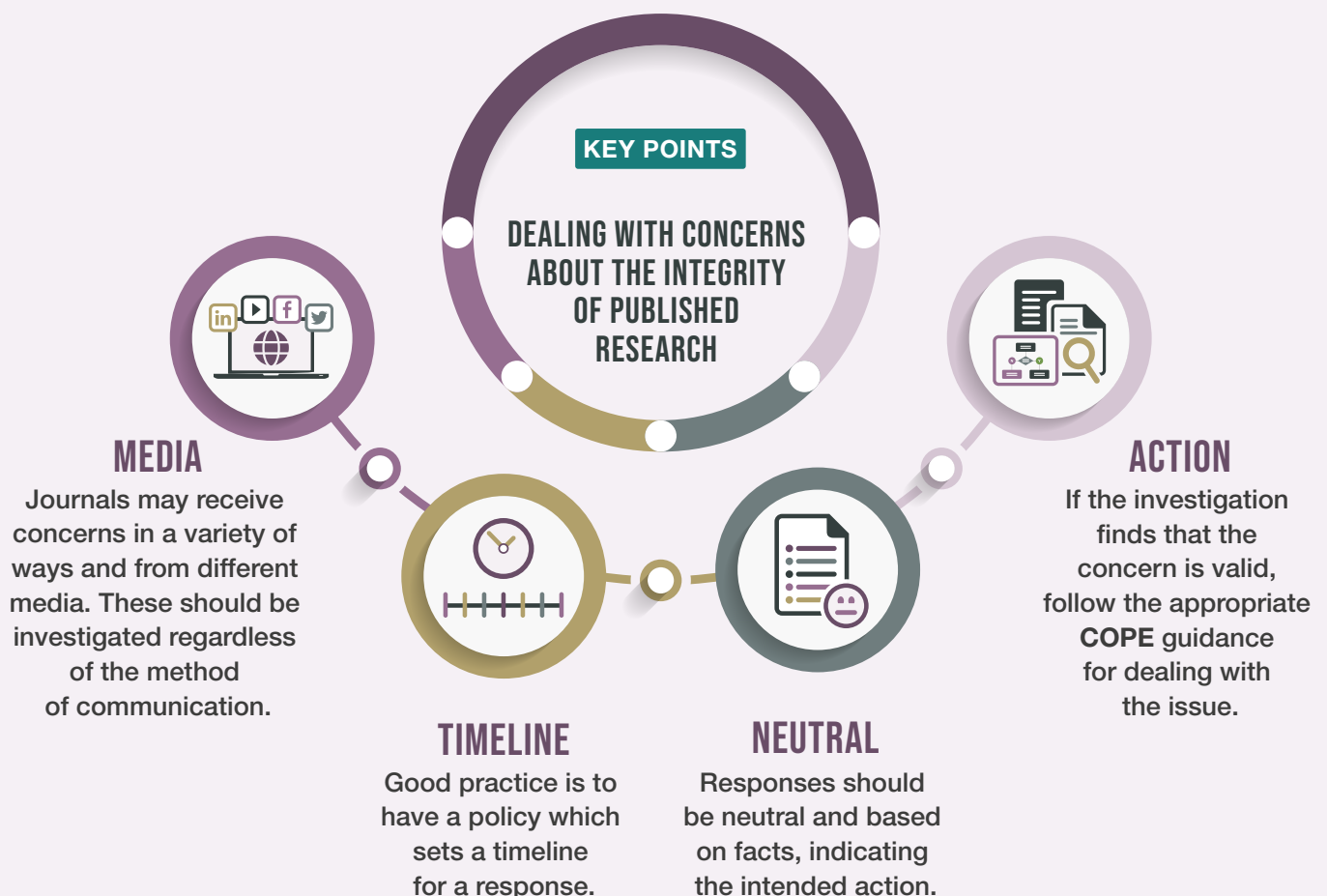
# DISCUSSION

## DEALING WITH CONCERNS ABOUT THE INTEGRITY OF PUBLISHED RESEARCH

COPE discussion documents introduce issues and aim to stimulate discussion about a topic. They are often about complex issues and COPE welcomes comments which add to the ongoing debate.

COPE discussion documents should not be considered formal COPE policy. Discussion documents may be revised but remain a discussion document as the issues develop and if further comment from the community is sought, or they may be revised to become formal COPE policy (and published as COPE Guidelines).

We welcome further comments; please send your feedback to **Natalie Ridgeway, Executive Officer** [cope\\_execofficer@publicationethics.org](mailto:cope_execofficer@publicationethics.org)



## Introduction

In 2013, the Chair of COPE, Virginia Barbour, wrote a document to stimulate discussion on **Responding to anonymous whistleblowers** (<https://doi.org/10.24318/Z9gtPzCa>). This document was in response to the increasing number of people raising concerns anonymously about research integrity in journals.

In 2015, two flowcharts were published jointly with BioMed Central: **Responding to whistleblowers when concerns are raised directly** (<https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.25>), for example, by email or other forms of correspondence to the journal, and **Responding to whistleblowers when concerns are raised via social media** (<https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.14>). Some people raise a series of concerns to the same journal, and COPE has provided guidance for this scenario **Addressing ethics complaints from complainants who submit multiple issues** (<https://doi.org/10.24318/qiW7mhWw>).

More recently, a COPE Forum was held on **Coordinating multi-journal complaints** (<https://cope.onl/multi-journal-complaints>).

Since these documents were produced, reporting of ethical concerns about research publications has become even more prevalent, and the issues that they identify have become more complex. These issues include situations where multiple concerns are raised simultaneously to multiple journals. Hence revisiting these documents and updating the guidance is timely. This document does not cover appeals to editorial decisions.

In response to changes in the terminology being used in scholarly publishing, we refer to ‘people who raise concerns’, rather than whistleblowers. Previous documents referred to whistleblowers, and these have not been changed.

## Who raises concerns?

This guidance refers to anyone, named or anonymous, who notifies journals or publishers of: unsound, unethical, or otherwise concerning published research; research reporting issues; publication ethics complaints; or other matters that have implications for the integrity or reliability of the published research record. When complaints are raised, evidence should be provided to support the claims. Some researchers spend a lot of time detecting and reporting on allegedly fraudulent activities and may raise complaints about many publications.

## Types of issues reported

Typical issues reported include (but are not limited to) concerns of plagiarism, image manipulation, data appropriation (use without permission), data fabrication, various types of errors, authorship issues, undisclosed conflicts of interest, computer generated manuscripts, lack of ethics approval for research involving human subjects, flawed research that could have an adverse effect on public health, concerns about study design, and results reported for animal research.

## How are concerns raised to editors and publishers?

There are many ways of raising concerns to editors and publishers. Issues can be broadcast to the world through traditional media, through social media outlets and platforms, such as Twitter, and through websites, such as PubPeer, which allow papers to be discussed post-publication. However, **COPE** recommends that journals and publishers should be contacted directly with any concerns through a central email account. This email address should be posted prominently on the journal and publisher websites. This approach provides assurance for the person raising the complaint that the editor or publisher has received the information, and it also means that editors have a direct method of communication with the person raising the issue, avoiding individual staff members being targeted. This method of communication will also help editors and publishers to obtain further information or clarification from the complainant, if needed, and to notify the person of the outcome of the case. Publishers often welcome being notified of a concern with a journal in their portfolio, and direct email communication allows the publisher to respond more effectively when dealing with older and complex cases.

As well as notifying the journal directly, people can use other forums, including social media and post-publication discussion sites, to discuss concerns and notify readers of potential issues in published work. However, the complainant should not assume that these discussions will reach the affected journal or publisher. Contact should therefore be made directly with the journal or publisher if a response is expected. Journals have a duty to follow up any concerns raised with them directly, regardless of the informality of the route. Journals may wish to indicate that informal means are not the best approach to raising concerns because of the risk that they will not be seen. However, journals should have policies in place about how or whether they will respond to issues that are not raised to them directly.

## How should concerns be responded to?

These guidelines should be read along with the flowcharts on **Responding to whistleblowers when concerns are raised directly** (<https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.25>), for example, by email, and **Responding to whistleblowers when concerns are raised via social media** (<https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.14>), as well as the guidance on **Sharing of information among editors-in-chief regarding possible misconduct** (<https://doi.org/10.24318/Y18YSSbNrv>). Publishers and editors should also consider whether concerns about integrity can be extracted and dealt with under COPE's existing guidance on **Handling of post-publication critiques** (<https://doi.org/10.24318/o1VgCAih>). The roles of each party involved in handling these complaints (editor/journal, publisher, institution) are set out in the CLUE Guidelines.<sup>1</sup>

All requests should be considered and investigated if they are credible and are about research integrity in a publication. Priority could be given to more recent publications, higher impact publications, or research articles with a lot of complaints.

- Acknowledge receipt and investigate according to the appropriate COPE flowchart or guidance, and the publisher's guidance. It is good practice to have a policy which sets a timeline for a response so that the complainant knows what to expect.
- Responses should be neutral and based on facts, indicating the intended action. For example,

“Dear XX, Thank you for getting in contact with us and drawing our attention to the concerns you have. We will investigate and take action as needed, in accordance with COPE guidelines.  
Yours sincerely”

Do not get into personal exchanges, be clear about timelines (as far as is practicable), and set expectations for complainants. For example, will the editor respond to the person raising the complaint if there is no further information to share?

- There is no need to engage in extensive correspondence once the timelines and expectations have been set. If this process has been followed and there is still concern, the advice of COPE can be sought.
- Concerns of a harassing, offensive, threatening, or defamatory manner should be referred to legal counsel or other appropriate authorities, and the journal should notify the complainant that concerns made in such language will not be investigated.
- If the investigation finds that the concern is valid, follow the appropriate COPE guidance for dealing with the issue.
- It is important to respect the correspondent's right to anonymity, and their identity should not be revealed to the party facing concerns without the correspondent's explicit permission.

- Consider thanking the person who raised the concern (with their permission, or anonymously if appropriate) in any journal notice that may be published (eg, a retraction). The notice could link to comments in the public domain or an archived post, if appropriate. Editors should remember that comments on social media and post-publication platforms may be temporary, which could result in dead links connected with retraction notices or expressions of concern.
- When the investigation is closed, inform the complainant of the action you are taking. If they do not accept your response, and you are confident in your handling of the case, reiterate your response once and then say that you consider the case closed and do not respond further.
- COPE does not respond when copied into complaints.


## Dealing with multiple concerns to the same journal from one individual

On occasion, a journal may get several communications from the same source. Concerns may be directed at an author, editor, or the journal in general. If these concerns are well founded, investigations should proceed as needed. However, there are also cases where an individual raises repeated concerns against a journal, editor, or author that are found to be baseless. COPE has provided separate guidance on how to respond in these circumstances **Addressing ethics complaints from complainants who submit multiple issues** (<https://doi.org/10.24318/qiW7mhWw>).

## Dealing with issues raised across multiple journals

Concerns raised can develop into large investigations involving multiple journals, editors, and publishers. An initial discussion on this matter was held at the **COPE Forum** in June 2021 **Coordinating multi-journal complaints** (<https://cope.onl/multi-journal-complaints>). These investigations are becoming more frequent and COPE has produced guidance on **Addressing concerns about systematic manipulation of the publication process** (<https://doi.org/10.24318/x0mN3xfd>). This addresses how editors and publishers can work together to resolve these concerns without breaching ethical considerations.

## REFERENCES

1. Wager E, Kleinert S, and on behalf of the CLUE Working Group. Cooperation & Liaison between Universities & Editors (CLUE): recommendations on best practice. *Res Integr Peer Rev* 2021;6:6.  
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s41073-021-00109-3> 

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

### Conceptualisation:

This discussion originated with a COPE discussion document on responding to anonymous whistleblowers, authored by the COPE Chair at that time, Virginia Barbour. The guidance was extended with two COPE flowcharts on responding to specific types of concerns, and further elaborated at a Forum discussion on co-ordinating multi-journal complaints in 2021 hosted by Deborah Kahn (COPE Trustee). The resulting discussion document was elaborated and written by Deborah Kahn on behalf of COPE Council.

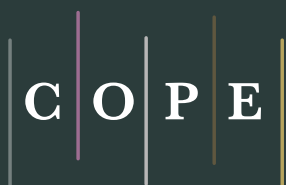
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*COPE provides leadership in thinking on publication ethics and practical resources to educate and support members, and offers a professional voice in current debates*



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