

# Inclusive Author Name Change Policies

## MODERATORS:

### Irving Rettig

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Portland, Oregon

### Jessica Rucker

ACS Publications  
Washington, DC

## SPEAKERS:

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Theresa Jean Tanenbaum (Tess)  
The University of California,  
Irvine  
Irvine, California

### Mia Ricci

Wiley  
Bloomington, Indiana

### Rachel L. Safer

Committee on Publication Ethics  
Boston, Massachusetts

## REPORTER:

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When an author's name has changed, and that author asks to have an already-published article updated to reflect this, how the publisher<sup>1</sup> responds can have a major impact on that author, both personally and professionally. Name changes occur due to a variety of life events, but restrictive publisher policies stand to do the most harm to transgender and nonbinary authors. This session provided perspectives from two researchers who have been instrumental in creating change across the publishing industry and offered guidance from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) for publishers seeking to implement more inclusive policies. The presenters explained how, in crafting or revising their policies on name changes, publishers have an opportunity to transform the research landscape into a more open and inclusive space.

Jessica Rucker began the session, letting attendees know that the speakers would cover inclusive policies and the practical and philosophical barriers to their implementation. She introduced the session's main moderator, Dr Irving Rettig, who led the initiative by the American Chemical Society (ACS) to overhaul its name change policy and then looked beyond ACS to champion inclusivity in the wider research and publishing environments.

Rettig began by sharing feedback from transgender authors of works published by ACS. Some authors reported not listing papers published under a previous name on their CVs for fear of outing themselves, and some expressed excitement at being able to move forward in their careers with a united academic record thanks to evolving policies.

<sup>1</sup>"Publisher" here will refer to any entity that publishes scientific research, including commercial publishers and societies that self-publish journals.

Rettig noted that these policies affect not only transgender authors, but also those whose names have changed due to marriage, divorce, or religious affiliation. ACS rolled out its new policy in 2020 and has since been able to address all of the author requests it has received, including one that involved correcting 106 papers dating back to 1971. ACS has also partnered with EDIS, an organization dedicated to improving diversity, equity, and inclusion in scientific research, in order to reach out to a wider set of publishers, encourage them to adopt more inclusive policies, and assist them with developing workflows for these changes.

Rettig asked Dr Tess Tanenbaum to explain why antiquated name change policies are harmful and invited her to share her experience of attempting to unite her scientific publication record under one name. Tanenbaum, Associate Professor at the University of California, Irvine, relayed her experience coming out as transgender in 2019, at the same time that she was about to go up for tenure. Her earlier published works had been published under a different name from the one under which she was seeking tenure. California has policies in place to protect marginalized groups from discrimination, but Tanenbaum noted that these measures do not account for implicit bias. She realized that her gender identity would be placed front and center while she was being considered for tenure and that this personal aspect of her life could overshadow her scholarly merits. To keep the focus of the review process strictly on her work, Tanenbaum reached out to 87 publications published by 16 publishers to request that her name be updated. Some publishers readily agreed, while others refused or never responded. Those who refused often cited the "sanctity of the historic record" as a main reason.

Tanenbaum recognized both a serious problem and an opportunity to help others in a similar situation. She reached out to the Association of Computing Machinery (ACM), which had published most of her peer-reviewed work, and discovered that the conversation was already taking place within that organization. Another transgender author had requested to have their name changed in an ACM publication, but that author's request had been terribly mishandled to the point of abuse. Tanenbaum took up the cause, refused to take no for an answer, and ultimately drafted ACM's trans-inclusive name change policy, the first ever publicly issued by a major publisher.

While this was a start, ACM lacked the resources, infrastructure, and staff allocation to execute the changes,

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rendering the policy little more than a performative gesture. Additionally, conversations with others in the research sphere highlighted the fact that widespread change would never take place without a broad consensus among publishers. Tanenbaum wrote an opinion piece for *Nature* that made an impact among readers and helped her connect with Rettig and ACS.<sup>1</sup> From there she built a Name Change Working Group across disciplines and reached out to EDIS and COPE to kickstart a larger conversation and get publishers thinking about the meaning of names—not just in terms of their utility for citations and tracking purposes, but also the ways in which they reveal information about a person’s identity and affect how an individual is perceived.

Tanenbaum expressed a sense of optimism that real change is on the horizon, given the positive response from publishers and the new guidance to be issued by COPE. She noted that she had expected this initiative to take 10+ years to find footing, considering that in many ways, the publishing world remains rooted in outdated print-based systems in which content is largely immutable. She also underscored the patriarchal nature of the problem, suggesting that if men traditionally changed their names to reflect their marital status, mechanisms would have been put in place long ago to update author names in published scholarly works.

Mia Ricci next provided the publisher perspective on name changes and these evolving policies, drawing from her experience at Wiley. The issue arose in response to an author request, then developed into a conversation about how problematic the existing policy was. Ricci, a lead on Wiley’s diversity, equity, and inclusion council, asked around the organization and teamed up with a colleague who was dealing with a similar request on drafting a new policy. Ricci’s research led her to the ACS policy championed by Rettig and an article in *Medium* co-authored by Rettig, Tanenbaum, and others, which provided a strong argument in favor of inclusive policies that she could cite whenever she was met with resistance.<sup>2</sup> One of the most frequent challenges she received was the assertion that allowing name changes would violate COPE guidelines, but as of this writing, COPE is poised to roll out new guidance in support of permitting name changes.

Ricci said that getting the policy changed took research and self-education. She emphasized the importance of finding like-minded allies when you are trying to enact change at your organization, rather than trying to go it alone. In the months since Wiley’s new policy rollout, over 100 corrections have been made.

The final presenter, Rachel Safer, spoke on behalf of COPE in her capacity as a council member and leader of COPE’s author name changes working group. Safer previewed COPE’s newly developed guidance on name changes and provided insight on how to implement it.

From 2019 to the present, COPE has received a few cases related to name changes, some submitted by publishers who had received author queries and some by authors who had requested name changes and encountered obstacles from publishers. Safer and others began a small working group, first consisting solely of cisgender allies but later expanded to include transgender authors. Two January 2021 COPE publications presented publishers with a way forward. An article by Safer summarized the steps taken by the working group and announced the forthcoming guidance, and a guest editorial by Tanenbaum, Rettig, and several colleagues outlined five guiding principles for publishers and COPE to follow when approaching name changes—accessibility, comprehensiveness, invisibility, expediency and simplicity, and recurrence and maintenance.<sup>3,4</sup> Safer gave a preview of the COPE guidance, designed to protect authors and minimize harm by not asking for reasons or supporting documentation and by putting an emphasis on “silent corrections,” i.e., edits not requiring the issuance of a formal correction notice.

A robust Q&A followed the presentations. Attendees were most interested in the logistics of implementation, such as changes to archive content and downstreaming to indexing services, and potential abuses, like authors who might attempt to change their names on retracted papers or publish under someone else’s identity. The speakers emphasized that it would be impossible to anticipate and address every contingency with the first iteration of a guidance document and that these recommendations would continue to evolve. All agreed that taking preliminary measures to reduce harm to authors was the more urgent task.

Safer shared that she and members of COPE are currently engaged with a working group at NISO, whose voting members recently approved a working item to develop a recommended practice on name changes in scholarly publications.<sup>5</sup> Those recommendations are expected to address items like archive changes and indexing. Tanenbaum mentioned that ACM is moving toward requiring all authors to provide an ORCID iD, noting that ORCID is a much more reliable identifier than names, reveals no personal details about an author, and serves as a useful way to “outsource” the identity verification process.

In the course of the discussion, the speakers reiterated that publishers should avoid making judgment calls about who merits a name change and should handle all requests expeditiously, staying ever mindful of the trauma that results from continued deadnaming during the time it takes to figure out whether and how to make a change. Tanenbaum, Rettig, and Safer encouraged anyone seeking practical guidance to reach out with questions. The forthcoming

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COPE guidance, built on the work of Tanenbaum, Rettig, and other determined author-activists, should provide ample support to publishers seeking to implement a more inclusive policy, should they encounter resistance.

### References and Links

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