

Natalie Ridgeway and COPE: Collaboratively Addressing Publication Ethics and Integrity

Sarah Frances Gordon and Jonathan Schultz

A key development of the last decade of scholarly publishing has been the rise in importance of the independent support organization. Typically acronymic, these organizations provide assistance, education, and standards to the scholarly publishing community. Having just marked 25 years since its founding, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) was one of the first of these organizations and has become a crucial source for guidance and education on publication ethics for journals and editors. As COPE Executive Officer, Natalie Ridgeway has been instrumental in steering the organization through recent changes and expansion as the recognition of the importance of publication ethics has grown.

Science Editor spoke with Natalie about her history with COPE, its growth as an international organization, and the intersection of diversity, equity, and inclusion and ethics.

Science Editor: How did you become involved with COPE?

Natalie Ridgeway: I joined COPE back in 2010, starting as the Operations Manager. Back then I was the only employee, and we were supported by a freelance administrator who had been there right from the early days. Then around 2013, my job was moved into what it is now the Executive Officer.

SE: It appears that COPE has expanded the number of staff since then too.

Ridgeway: We have. It was just me and the administrator for quite some time and we were supported by a freelance web manager and then another freelancer who supported us with our membership applications to ensure a high-quality standard for COPE membership. In 2017, COPE started to increase the number of staff in recognition of the complexities

within publication ethics and how it was expanding and coming to prominence more globally and internationally.

At that time, our membership application role expanded and took on a full-time employee to assess membership applications. Since then, we've also taken on an Engagement and Outreach officer, a Facilitation and Integrity Officer, and at the beginning of 2020, a Designer to support branding and design work. We've also recently added back in an Operations Manager to support me and the trustee board as well as the council.

SE: What was it that changed around 2017 that necessitated COPE's expansion?

Ridgeway: I think a lot of it initially started around predatory publishing. We have a very rigorous membership assessment process and with the rise of predatory publishing, we had to be sure that any of our applications were legitimate. And when I started in 2010, COPE itself was probably a fairly niche organization: publication ethics has always been there, but it was kind of secondary to research integrity. Over this time period, we've been able to reach a lot more people, and there is a greater understanding of the need for publication ethics, guidance, and educational support.

Internationally, we are trying to do all we can to support emerging regions and journals and publishers from those regions who are crying out for support, guidance, and education. The reach of COPE and the understanding that publication ethics has become more global.

SE: What role does COPE have in creating a culture of publication integrity and helping global institutions?

Ridgeway: We're very much around providing a collaborative space to discuss those issues. COPE isn't a regulatory body. We're not a statutory body. We don't have any legal framework. We are there purely to guide, educate, and advise. We've worked very hard over the past few years to expand our global reach to try and support those journals and those publishers in a number of ways. We've increased the geographical representation on our trustees and council

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board with special calls for nominations from specific regions so they can be represented, and we can better understand the issues that they face. We do outreach work in those areas so that we are not assuming what problems they face. We've done market research as well, which clearly shows that there are differing publication ethics issues that are of bigger importance in different regions. For example, back in 2019, we did research that showed that in South America, "salami slicing" was a big problem, and in India, there are issues around gift and guest authorship. We try to reach out to those regions, understand the issues that they are facing, and provide them with the resources that they need.

SE: Stepping back a bit to you specifically, can you discuss how you got involved in scholarly integrity and publication ethics and what led you to your role at COPE?

Ridgeway: It was one of those things that you kind of just fall into sometimes. Many years ago, when I left university, I started at one of the specialist journals at the BMJ Publishing Group. This was just before COPE was formed at the BMJ specialist journals group. I was aware of COPE, but I didn't have anything to do with it at that time. I was busy elsewhere, as during my time at the BMJ Publishing Group I became involved in their online manuscript tracking systems and implemented their online tracking systems across the whole of the BMJ publishing group.

I got very much into workflow systems and that operational aspect. Once I left there, I went to the Lancet where I started doing all their implementation as well. I was very much around project management, systems, and operations so when the role came up at COPE for an Operations Manager, it felt like a good fit to me at the time.

It was interesting to me to move outside of working on medical STM journals and move into COPE, which has such a broad reach. One of the things on our strategic objectives at the time was to reach out to journals outside of traditional STM-focused areas. I'm not saying that we've been 100% successful there, but we're still trying.

SE: In addition to predatory publishing, what other big changes have you seen in the industry around scholarly integrity and publication ethics?

Ridgeway: To start, models outside of traditional print and online publishing, including preprints, and whether our guidelines might or might not meet their needs. Preprint servers do refer to COPE, but they're not members of COPE. We are also exploring in COPE how we can provide guidance and support the conversations around DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility).

SE: The intersection between DEIA and ethics is interesting. For example, when something crosses over

from being a personnel issue and becomes a research or publication ethics issue. Not everyone agrees where that line is, so it is important territory to be navigating the next couple years.

Ridgeway: It really is. In mid-October 2022, we had our first annual retreat prior to the pandemic, where the council and trustee board and staff all got together to discuss the issues and direction of COPE going forward. We had a really interesting discussion around that intersection and what guidance we can provide that is related to the ethical situation compared to the personnel situation. For example, if somebody has been found guilty of a particular infraction, whatever that may well be, how does that impact any historical work that that researcher has done, and should it impact that historical work? There are lots of conversations around that, and I don't think there is a right or wrong answer at the moment, but certainly, all we're trying to do is come up with some guidance that editors and publishers may be able to use in trying to determine their own responses to that.

SE: What are some of the biggest changes you've seen in the industry in recent years, and where do you see the field of scholarly integrity and ethical publishing heading?

Ridgeway: I think one of the biggest changes is the number of people and organizations that are now involved in this area. It's very interesting to see how many people have comments, thoughts, opinions, and interests about what should happen. I think one of the challenges is not trying to please everybody, which we are never going to be able to do, but instead, navigating a path through that is trying to provide a solution, provide guidance, and provide support and advice that meets most people's needs. I think that is a big challenge, particularly for COPE, but also for other organizations as well. We are grappling with how we can better hear and listen to what people say and how we can try and incorporate some of those opinions and some of those ideas within the remit with which we are structured. How we are structured and how we can better meet those needs is an ongoing conversation within COPE, and I think that's something that will continually evolve as we go forward. Nobody is sure what that should look like or how that would function, but there are certainly lots of ongoing conversations about how we can better ensure the integrity of scholarly literature.

SE: Is there an aspect of COPE that is less well-known that people should know about?

Ridgeway: The most obvious one is that COPE is not a regulatory body. I appreciate people's frustrations because there is no regulatory body for people to go to and COPE

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has one of the highest profiles. Fundamentally, COPE is an educational and guidance organization for everybody. We have members, and our primary focus is our members, but we are here for non-members and everybody in the community as well. We are always trying to be collaborative and work together to come to a solution. COPE is never going to be the one that can do it by itself: no one organization can do it alone. Our main focus is finding ways to work with others.

On that point, I want to highlight our volunteers. We have a volunteer trustee board and volunteer council; without them, there would be no COPE. They do this in their own time, and they are very, very committed to providing the

guidance and solutions that are needed in the community. The work they do is just amazing. They give their free time to do this, and they do some fantastic work.

For me personally, I've been with COPE now for over 12 years, which has been the longest I've ever been in a position. It's a testament to the fact that the issues are continually evolving. There are constant challenges and there's always something new to learn, so it's always kept the role interesting. It keeps the organization interesting because there are always new things for us to respond to and work on. Even when you think you've seen it all, you really haven't.



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