More on Ethics and Scholarship

At ACS Nano, when ethics questions arise regarding manuscripts that have been submitted to us or that we have published, we follow guidance from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) in determining how to handle these issues.1 The suggested specific actions and their order can be found in the COPE flowcharts in ref 1. These strategies have been agreed upon across most of the top publishers in science, engineering, and medicine.

Issues with manuscripts are most frequently identified by our editors, referees, staff, or software. These manuscripts are rejected without the possibility of resubmission and the issues and authors are treated as described below. Occasionally, a manuscript with potential problems makes it to publication and these issues are subsequently identified by readers, collaborators, or colleagues. Sometimes, questions are sent directly to us, and we are able to reach out to authors and, if warranted, their institutions. Other times, questions are raised on social media. As suggested in the COPE guidelines, we treat both of these alert methods seriously and handle them essentially the same way.

As with manuscript submissions, our scientist/editors review and discuss the issues raised and reach out to the authors for comment and/or the referring source for clarification, as needed. If ethics problems are ultimately found, actions regarding the publication(s) (i.e., additions/corrections or retractions), submission(s), authors (e.g., potential author sanctions), and institutions (i.e., alerting the authors’ managers, department heads, and/or deans) may be taken.

On the scholarly side, we have been pleased to see increasing direct communication between critics and original authors. Sometimes these conversations are facilitated through us, when those commenting prefer to maintain their anonymity with respect to the authors and sometimes not; then, we are simply included in the conversation. Valuable discussions of interest to the community have been turned into refereed Comments and Replies. Even without direct communications between critics/commenters and authors, these published point–counterpoint discussions give a forum for the community to discuss topics of broad interest.

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Two aspects of the COPE guidelines can be frustrating. First, the process can be quite slow. After an initial point regarding a paper is made, unless the authors choose to reply promptly, either to the commenters and/or us directly or publicly on social media, the time to closure can be long. If there is an ethics investigation, it most likely will be undertaken by the authors’ institutions, and only results that change the publication status (i.e., additions/corrections or retractions) become known. Even then, the time delay can be months or even years from the original comments. As editors, we are able to label manuscripts with statements of concern during this period, but as a journal, editor, or publisher, we are not empowered as an investigative body and have essentially no investigative capabilities at our disposal other than our own and our advisors’ expertise. In obvious cases, we can and do act unilaterally.

One fear is that the ethics oversight structure at a university, company, or research institution may be insufficient or could be motivated to act in self-protection. In the decade in which we have operated, we have only encountered this situation one time. Luckily, we had enough information and expertise to handle this case. Nonetheless, this weak point remains, and we welcome your suggestions on how we as a community might address it.

Announcements. With the rising number and quality of our submissions, we are increasingly raising the thresholds for publication (and external review) at ACS Nano. I continue to read and to rate all submitted manuscripts within hours of submission, unless I have a conflict of interest with a specific one (in which case one of our associate editors takes over that manuscript for me). Then, I either send it to external referees or, more commonly, assign one of our associate editors with expertise in the field of the work to consider the manuscript further as well as to consult with other editors and external referees, as appropriate. In order to broaden our coverage and knowledge base and to maintain our speed and efficiency, we are now expanding our editorial ranks.

Prof. Omid Farokhzad of Harvard Medical School and Brigham & Women’s Hospital will join ACS Nano as an associate editor.

We are delighted to announce that Prof. Omid Farokhzad, Professor at Harvard Medical School and Director of the Laboratory of Nanomedicine and Biomaterials at Brigham and Women’s Hospital, will join ACS Nano as an associate editor. Prof. Farokhzad is a leading figure in nanomedicine and biomaterials and has been an active ACS Nano author, advisor, and Editorial Advisor Board member.

Paul S. Weiss, Editor-in-Chief

Published: November 28, 2017
Notes
Views expressed in this editorial are those of the author and not necessarily the views of the ACS.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
I thank Drs. Laura Fernandez, Penelope Lewis, Wolfgang Parak, Phil Szuroni, Sarah Tegen, Heather Tierney, and Jake Yeston as well as our associate editors for helpful discussions.

REFERENCES