

Due process in the Twitter age

Until recently, the only insight that the research community had into published papers that might be suspect, and thus candidates for retraction, was through the formal investigations by institutions or funders and the official announcements made by journals. Today, online communities such as PubPeer and Retraction Watch could be the first to raise an alert that a paper may require additional scrutiny. The involvement of such online entities has made the standardization of processes to address allegations more complex and has led to less patience from the scientific community and the public with what are often long timelines in institutional misconduct investigations. Editors are caught in the middle: They want to correct the literature as quickly as possible to avoid misleading readers with flawed information, but they also want to ensure that authors have received due process, even as rumors of scientific misconduct may be amplified through social media. Last month, a Journals Summit convened by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences tackled this topic in the larger context of research integrity, and several solutions emerged.

Journals have their own requirements for author certification of the openness, transparency, and quality of a research paper and can take preemptive action to retract papers if the authors falsify those certifications, even before misconduct investigations have concluded. One example provided was a paper retracted based on lack of availability of the data, falsification of funding sources, and misrepresentation of approval by an institutional review board. In situations where a journal lacks authority to act, but preliminary evidence suggests that a paper will need to be retracted, an “editorial expression of con-

cern” can suitably alert the community that the results may be suspect, without the journal taking irreversible action. Although the summit attendees agreed that only institutions had the necessary access to conduct investigations, those institutions would benefit from the involvement and oversight of an experienced, independent party with no conflict of interest in the matter to speed up the process and ensure a quality outcome. Many participants felt that the stigma of having a retraction is so great that it might discourage authors from removing papers that are flawed because of honest

errors. Finding some other terminology for such situations would help clean up the literature and reward good behavior.

Should there be a statute of limitation on retractions? Two panelists had experiences as editors with requests to retract papers that were published more than 50 years ago. This clearly raises the question of due process. None of the authors were alive to respond to the charges of misconduct. Only incomplete records survived regarding how decisions about those papers were made. The requests were declined. Although panelists did not come up with a fixed amount of time beyond which a paper would be too old to retract, consideration of a paper's current influence and whether evidence exists to provide due process

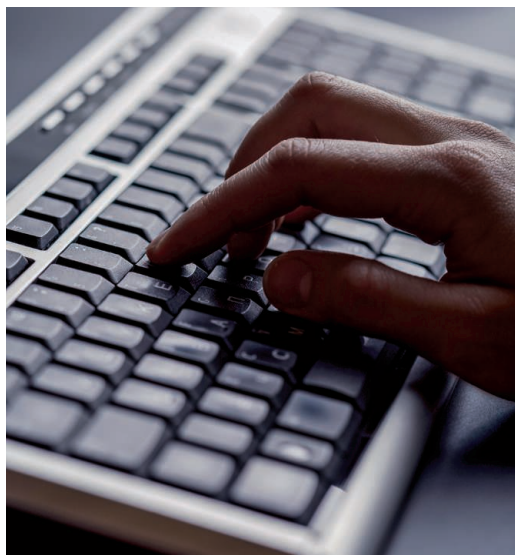
should weigh into the course of action in such cases.

Editors are often caught in the crossfire between impatient readers who may reach conclusions about the validity of misconduct allegations on the basis of incomplete information online, and authors who are concerned about damage to their reputation. In the final analysis, the editor's paramount concern should be for the integrity of the scientific record.

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