

Corresponding Authors: Rules, Responsibilities and Risks

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ABSTRACT

It is generally understood that the corresponding author (CA) is responsible for all communications related to the submission of a manuscript to a journal. However, it is quite common that the CA be a student or inexperienced scientist, which can lead to often very damaging results arising from the allocation of responsibility to that person. Errors most commonly made by these CAs (despite signed declarations to the publisher or journal) include: submission of a manuscript without knowledge of the co-authors; falsification of data or double submissions; and inclusion of false authors or those who should not be authors. Most of these errors could be eliminated if: 1) There were full, open and transparent communication between the CA and the other co-authors and between the CA and the publisher; 2) The CA selected were a senior member of the research group; 3) All key points during the publishing process were shared with all co-authors, including submission, main revisions and acceptance; and 4) The publisher makes a good faith effort to obtain written permission to publish and print from each CA. The choice of the CA should not lie with the journal or publisher, but the choice should be made smartly in line with guidelines such as those presented in this paper.

Keywords: author responsibilities, editorial responsibilities, new guidelines, publisher's view, scientific misconduct

Abbreviations: CA, corresponding author

GENERAL ROLES OF THE CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

The corresponding author (CA) is generally understood to be the person who holds all communication with journal editors from submission to publication, keeps co-authors informed and involved during the review process, and corresponds with members of the scientific community after manuscript publication. The CA's principle roles, in addition to those of being an author, are therefore generally related to the submission process and communication. The choice of CA is usually made by the authors rather than by the journal, and is based on any number of criteria, including research role, authority, and personal or professional qualities. Obviously the CA should have good communication skills, but he or she should also be aware of and respect professional, ethical and legal norms associated with scientific conduct.

There are situations in which problems arise when fulfilling these roles. For example, the CA may be a student working towards an MSc or PhD degree. Students generally have limited experience in scientific publishing, and therefore tend to be unfamiliar with professional, ethical, and legal norms. Most students will leave science as their careers develop, in which case subsequent attempts by peers to communicate with them can be futile. Alternatively, the CA may have played more of a supervisory or administrative role¹ in the submitted study. Oftentimes those in supervisory or administrative roles are older scientists who might not have the time to communicate with journal

editors, authors, and peers. They may also not have sufficient time, experience, or patience for increasingly common, if not requisite online submission processes. Many online journals require that the submitter is the CA, in which an administrator may have to delegate submission and perhaps journal communication roles to staff or students. Finally, an administrator may not be well placed to communicate with editors or peers on technical details if he or she did not actually conduct the study.

These are common issues encountered by editors, but they are relatively minor problems. A far more serious problem has to do with professional, ethical and legal aspects of CAs in their roles of manuscript submission and communication. We are speaking of scientific misconduct, which can include fraud, data fabrication, plagiarism, and other questionable practices (Sheetz 2012). It is difficult to gauge how widespread scientific misconduct is becoming, but several indicators suggest it is a growing concern. For example, Sheetz (2012) points out that in the first, 1978 edition of the "Uniform Requirements," which is the most frequently used "Instructions to Authors" guide among biomedical science journals, only contained 10 pages of concise guidelines on the mechanics of manuscript preparation. The most recent issue, however, includes topics that are related to matters of research integrity. This suggests not only the growing importance of ethics in scientific publication, but by corollary a growing presence of scientific misconduct. Another example is that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, whose National Institute of Health financed ~\$26 billion in biomedical research in 2003, created in recent years the Office of Research Integrity (web-site 1) to address and gauge the prevalence of scientific misconduct, and to raise ethical standards in science. Some time ago, Marshall (2000) concluded that there was no consensus on how widespread scientific misconduct was.

¹ Debate continues over what constitutes conditions of authorship (Sheetz 2012), but by most journal and professional standards, a supervisory or administrative roles alone would not warrant being an author, let alone CA – see next section.

He cites one estimate “on the low end” for the U.S of one case per 100,000 scientists per year, which was based on government grant statistics. But he also cites a scientist survey in which one in 100 researchers consistently report that they know of instances of misconduct.

Thus there have been clear signs of growing scientific misconduct in the biomedical sciences for years. Before describing emerging risks that we in the agricultural and plant sciences have seen, we review the roles and responsibilities of the CA in the eyes of major publishers.

PUBLISHER VIEWS ON RESPONSIBILITIES OF CORRESPONDING AUTHORS

Different publishers view and assign responsibilities of CAs in somewhat different ways. The views of two major scientific publishers are summarized below as case studies.

Case 1: Elsevier and the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors

Elsevier follows the guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) (web-site 2), which defines the CA as one of the authors designated by co-authors to serve as the primary point of contact for the Editorial Office for all matters regarding a submitted manuscript, and as the primary point of contact for readers after publication. An *author* is “a person who has made a substantial intellectual contribution to a submitted manuscript and accepts public responsibility for its content.” Substantial contribution includes *all* of the following:

- 1) Conceptualization and design of the study, and/or acquisition of the data, and/or analysis and interpretation of the data;
- 2) Drafting and/or critical revision of the manuscript; and
- 3) Final approval of the version to be published.

ICMJE guidelines stipulate that it is the CA’s responsibility to share all communications from the Editorial Office with the other co-authors “when applicable.” On its webpage “Ethical Considerations in the Conduct and Reporting of Research,” ICMJE further states “In the past, readers were rarely provided with information about contributions to studies from persons listed as authors and in Acknowledgments. Some journals now request and publish *information about the contributions of each person named as having participated in a submitted study*, at least for original research” (italics added).

ICMJE further states that “Some journals now also request that *one or more authors, referred to as “guarantors,” be identified as the persons who take responsibility for the integrity of the work as a whole, from inception to published article, and publish that information.*” (italics added). ICMJE does not specify which journals request guarantors, but to our knowledge Elsevier’s scientific journals are not among them.

Elsevier’s “Author’s Rights & Responsibilities” includes a section on Ethical guidelines for journal publications (web-site 3), which state that the CA should ensure that:

- 1) All appropriate co-authors and no inappropriate co-authors are included in the paper; and
- 2) All co-authors have seen, approved, and agreed to submit the final version of the paper for publication.

In most Elsevier journals devoted to the agricultural and biological sciences, the CA’s roles are consistent with these overall guidelines; however, in its medical journals, there are nuanced differences for the responsibilities of CA’s and co-authors. For example:

- 1) For the journal “Academic Pediatrics,” the cover letter should be signed by all authors, and in the case of group authorship, one person should be designated as the “lead author” (web-site 4); and
- 2) For the International Journal of Cardiology, *all authors and contributors are required to submit an author agreement form stating their role in the article* (web-site 5) (ital-

ics added).²

Despite the apparent bond and congruence between Elsevier and the ICMJE with regards to CA, the definitions regarding co-authorship are completely juxtaposed, as indicated by a single preposition (Teixeira da Silva 2012b).

Case 2: Springer

Springer’s policy on Publishing Integrity (web-site 6) is in accordance with the philosophy of the Committee on Publishing Ethics (web-site 7). In most Springer journals, the CA is responsible for remaining in contact with both the Editorial office and the Publisher, and is the only co-author able to track the article from acceptance to publication (web-site 6). It is normal practice for the CA to correspond on behalf of all authors, and to contact the other authors during the review and publication process if and when deemed necessary. Furthermore, the CA is responsible for keeping all review documents (different versions of the manuscript, e-mails, etc.), and must sign the Copyright Transfer Statement online. Usually manuscripts are not published until this copyright has been transferred. The CA also makes other publishing decisions, such as whether the article will be published as open access, or whether figures should appear in color.

In the initial stages of the editorial process, some (but not all) Springer journals request co-authors to confirm their authorship of submitted manuscripts in order to prevent cases of unauthorized authorship or conflicts of interest. However, this confirmation usually comes in the form of an automatically generated e-mail³ that requests confirmation of authorship (see **Appendix**), and this policy appears to only have been implemented in 2011.

IRRESPONSIBLE AND UNETHICAL CORRESPONDING AUTHORS

In our recent experience as scientists, professors, and editors in the agricultural and plant sciences, emerging risks associated with merely *irresponsible* CA’s include:

- 1) Online submission mistakes due to carelessness or lack of experience; these may include incorrect formatting, poor spelling and grammar, and incorrect information on co-authors’ names or affiliations; and
- 2) Administrators adding their own names without the permission or knowledge of co-authors.

The first can result in wasted time and resources on the part of journals and reviewers, and therefore also constitutes a disservice to other aspiring authors who want to publish their work. Careless submissions can also result in lost recognition for co-authors and their institutions. In general, such irresponsible conduct can be addressed through experience and better training of scientists.

The second must be addressed at an institutional, professional, and perhaps national policy level. The overwhelming view within the scientific community is that administration alone, including acquiring research funds or distant, general supervision of research units, does not constitute grounds for authorship (Sheetz 2012; web-site 2; web-site 7; Roig 2012). Furthermore, “honorary,” “guest” or “courtesy” authorship assigned on the basis of some leadership position (e.g., being head of the department where the research is carried out, or international reputation) must also be avoided. We are aware that there are certain cultural and institutional settings in which there has been a tradition of

² In a study of Instructions to Authors of 48 journals in the biomedical sciences, Sheetz (2012) found that nine required authors to sign a document attesting to their role in the work during manuscript submission. Nineteen, however, were much more lax, and merely assumed manuscripts submitted to them had been approved by all authors.

³ Sadly, we are aware of cases in which false email accounts were generated by unethical CA’s to prevent discovery of unauthorized authorship by unsuspecting publishers and scientists.

giving administrators and other persons of reputation honorary forms of authorship (Bosch and Titus 2009; Roig 2012)⁴. But it should be increasingly clear from recent public incidents of misconduct (Marshall 2000; Pallava 2003; web-site 8; web-site 9) that not only does this practice not honor such persons, it can instead place them, and therefore their institutions and even governments, at risk of being tainted by scientific conduct.

There is a much more onerous set of emerging risks in the agricultural and plant sciences associated with *unethical* CA's. These have included:

- 1) Submission of manuscripts that include names of authors who have not given their permission as co-author, or did not even know of the manuscript's existence.
- 2) Duplicate journal submissions and sometimes duplicate publication, i.e. self-plagiarism;

With regard to the first, we know that "author inflation" has been a growing trend for decades – in 2006, more than 100 papers had over 500 co-authors (Sekercioglu 2008)! Part of this inflation may be due to larger studies and larger databases, but we are talking of such things as gratuitous authorship to "bask in the light of a greater name" (Broad 1981), or ingratiate the CA to those in positions of power or influence. It may also be done with a view towards enhanced name association and increased chances of manuscript acceptance. Broad (1981) recounts one editor receiving a call from a scientist whose name was used as co-author without permission when not only did he not agree with the paper's conclusions, but his contribution amounted to very short elevator conversation with the lead author. As stated before, adding prominent names as authors without their knowledge or involvement is against the policy of almost all reputable journals, and is clearly unethical (Sekercioglu 2008; CSSA 2012; web-sites 2, 3, 4, 6, 7). As far as we can tell, the only real difference among journals regarding this practice is the measures they take to prevent it from happening.

The second form of unethical behavior may be partly the result of questionable academic policy, which was described by Roig (2012): "The current academic reward system is thought to produce a tremendous amount of pressure to generate as many publications as possible. Unfortunately, some of the most serious negative outcomes of the present system are the problems of duplicate publication and of redundant publication." This was more succinctly described in a quotation by Marshall (2000) as this "...damned business of counting numbers of papers for promotion, rather than quality."

Four of 48 biomedical journals examined by Sheetz (2012) addressed duplicate journal submissions by stating that such would not be tolerated. The same may be said for prominent journals in the agricultural and plant sciences. In its statement of ethics, the Crop Science Society of America (CSSA 2012), which publishes "Crop Science" and has members in more than 100 countries, warns "Authors, be aware that your papers may be screened for plagiarism. Our software product evaluates papers to find significant duplication. If there appears to be major repetition from other sources, we will forward those papers to the Journal Editor for further evaluation and action if warranted." It further stipulates in its Prior Publication Policy "Papers submitted to the Journal must be original research, unpublished and not considered for publication elsewhere." Finally, before any paper can be published, the CA and *all coauthors* are required to sign a hardcopy "Permission to Publish and Republish" form, which includes the following paragraph in bold print:

"By signing this document, the author(s) further stipulate that this Work has not been published elsewhere and that it is not currently under review by any other publication. The author(s) further agree that until such time that ASA, CSSA, and/or SSSA or its or their agent publish(es) this

Work, or officially decide(s) not to publish it, and issue(s) a written letter of acceptance or release (rejection), this Work will not be published or offered to any other publisher."

Some authors do not see an issue with widely circulating their manuscripts for multiple journal consideration. But this behavior constitutes unprofessional conduct because it wastes space, editorial resources, and reviewer time, and prevents other original research from being published; it constitutes unethical conduct because it inflates research impact, and is harmful to database construction and meta-analyses (Roig 2012). Finally, it may constitute illegal conduct because it might constitute copyright infringement against one or more publishers; in many cases such behavior is blatantly against the very legally binding copyright agreement that authors sign.

There are no doubt cultural and perception issues involved with both gratuitous or unauthorized co-authorship on the one hand, and self-plagiarism and simultaneous journal submission on the other. Even though both constitute serious acts of scientific misconduct by international standards, those who have worked internationally know that such acts may sometimes be committed more out of cultural differences and unfamiliarity with international scientific standards (Li and Xiong 1996; Bosch and Titus 2009) rather than deliberate dishonesty.

Whether inappropriate behavior by CA's is merely irresponsible or downright unethical, it could be avoided or at least reduced in frequency and severity if more attention were given when training scientists to the importance of scientific integrity (but see next section), and the severe consequences of even appearance of scientific misconduct to both individuals and institutions (Marshall 1986, 2000). Even authors who have been exonerated after investigation often encounter lasting negative career consequences (Kaiser 1996).

IRRESPONSIBLE AND UNETHICAL PUBLISHERS

A relatively new dimension to the problem of poor behavior on the part of CA's has to do with the explosion of online (Contreras 2012) and lower-tier scientific journals. We do not at all suggest that one necessarily implies the other, but the simple fact is that the internet and newer technology has made on-line and even hardcopy scientific publishing very inexpensive, and therefore easier for authors and implementing CA's to publish and republish marginal, flawed and plagiarized work in marginal journals (Marshall 1986; Long *et al.* 2009). Recent studies have demonstrated that poor publication standards and processes result in the publication of several duplicated and plagiarized articles (Long *et al.* 2009).

In light of a paucity of literature on the reactions of both victims and perpetrators who were confronted with evidence of possible misconduct, Long *et al.* (2009) used their own automated process to identify highly similar citations in MEDLINE, a database of life sciences and biomedical publications. Their full-text analysis identified 212 pairs of articles that had signs of potential plagiarism. They then sent questionnaires to authors and editors of 163 of these articles, supplemented with copies of both manuscripts. The range of reactions of editors and authors was highly instructive: Editors launched 83 internal investigations, of which 46 led to some form of retraction of the duplicate article (according to Long *et al.* (2009), such retractions, whatever the form, would not propagate back to MEDLINE unless an explicit request is made by the journal, so researchers and clinicians would probably never be aware of the article's dubious status). A large portion of the duplicates were published in low-profile journals, and in fact Impact Factors[®] were only available for 199 of 285 involved journals. Original publications were cited on average 28 times, whereas their corresponding plagiarized ones were cited an average of only two times. Nonetheless, in 10 instances, the plagiarized article was cited at least as often as the original publication, possibly because search engines return more recent

⁴ Some of the authors have been unwitting victims of such practices.

articles first.

Of the 175 journal editors whom Long *et al.* (2009) contacted, 11 admitted they had never personally dealt with a potentially plagiarized manuscript and were unsure how to proceed. The majority showed deep concern and were open to any recommendations on the part of the authors, who directed them to documents for editors at the Office of Research Integrity (web-site 1).

More importantly, at least for the purposes of this article, nearly half of the questionnaires received no action. Twelve editors specifically indicated that their journal would do nothing. The questionnaires revealed much about the attitudes and motivations of scientists around the globe, including why some journal editors do not pursue obvious cases of duplication. As the authors (Long *et al.* 2009) state “Some apparently do not want to deal with the added stress of conducting a thorough investigation. Others feel it may bring bad publicity or reflect poorly on their journal’s review process.”

DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM

We in the agricultural and plant sciences must recognize that scientific misconduct, including both irresponsible and unethical acts, are on the rise irrespective of discipline, culture or nationality. Such misconduct must be dealt with severely by scientific journals, professions, and institutions, for it threatens science itself. Unsurprisingly, various publishers are now taking steps to reinforce policies that address misconduct (Long *et al.* 2009). Based on points raised in this article, and on our own experience, we propose the following journal guidelines with a view towards the agricultural and plant sciences avoiding the apparent fate of responsible journalism:

- 1) Follow an international model of norms, such as that of GSB (www.globalsciencebooks.info);
- 2) All authors’ e-mails should be submitted with the manuscript to the journal with a written and signed declaration of originality, and a short description by each author of his or her role in the study. The journal may then judge whether any author has a conflict of interest, qualifies for authorship, and indeed has given permission for their name to be included in the submission. Authenticity of contact information should be verified.
- 3) We are persuaded that that every paper should have two CA’s: The first would be the person who did most of the experimental work (i.e. the lead scientist) and the second would be the supervisor, or “guarantor” or “Lead author.” This would diminish communication problems associated with inexperienced and administrative CA’s, but also create a clear role for those who speak for the overall integrity of the study. This is needed for papers with a large number of co-authors.
- 4) After each revision step, all authors should be copied on communication and sent relevant files. This allows the authors to discuss amongst themselves the most effective way of dealing with the required edits that have emerged from the peer review process. The designated CA should then re-submit the manuscript that reflects the totality of all authors’ edits.
- 5) All authors should be informed when a paper has been accepted for publication, and be sent a copy of galley proofs. All authors should sign the copyright transfer (if applicable; in some cases, such as the United States Department of Agriculture, statute does not allow copyright transfer).
- 6) Journal “Instructions to Authors” need to have clear ethics policies and explicitly state what constitutes unethical practices, including multiple submissions.
- 7) Journals should develop policies to promote responsible authorship practices, including procedures for responding to allegations or indications of misconduct in published research or reports submitted for publication (Sheetz 2012).
- 8) Journals should require authors who submit manuscripts to also submit previously published papers and other manuscripts currently under review that are related to the manu-

script under consideration. This allows editors to determine whether the extent of overlap between such papers warrants the publication of yet another paper.

9) Journals should use commercial or freely available tools to detect plagiarism. A number of resources are given by Long *et al.* (2009) and the Office of Research Integrity (web-site 1).

But responsibility for scientific misconduct on the part of CA’s and co-authors does not rest solely with journals, but with the entire *international* scientific community. We stress *international* because scientific collaboration has for decades been becoming more and more international (Kerwin 1981; Holden 1994; The Royal Society 2011; Teixeira da Silva 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; 2012a). This is of course a good thing, but international standards of scientific integrity must be agreed upon and respected (Bosch and Titus 2009; Long *et al.* 2009). All countries need to improve their capacity to handle research misconduct when it does occur (Bosch and Titus 2009).

Responsibility also lies with professors and other scientific mentors, who clearly must do a better job of ensuring that the students and novices they mentor understand the importance of scientific integrity (Long *et al.* 2009). Although this is easily said, the difficulty of the challenge is not to be underestimated. Marshall (2000) describes one study in which no change occurred in attitudes towards ethics among 172 students at the University of Texas who enrolled in a course on “responsible conduct of research,” and another 1996 study in which those who had gone through an ethics training course were actually more willing to grant “honorary authorship” to colleagues.

There are several roles for institutional policy, in our view. One is to discourage practices which are associated with misconduct, including administrative or “honorary” authorship (Roig 2012; Sheetz 2012; web-site 2, 7). A more fundamental one is to realize that blindly emphasizing the number and “impact factor” in promotion and hiring not only is a poor manner to judge scientific productivity (Marshall 2000; Pallava 2003), but encourages self-plagiarism, “salami” publishing, and other ways of manipulating vita, some of which are blatantly unethical. They would do well to remember that James Watson, author of the paper which first described the structure of DNA, only had 18 papers published when he became associate professor at Harvard (Broad 1981).

Finally, perhaps one of the toughest jobs will be on the part of peer reviewers who must accept and diligently meet with little thanks the expectations of an informed and thorough (Long *et al.* 2009) review. This is becoming an ever more challenging task in today’s climate where competing online publishers strive to complete the reviews in ever shorter times. But if reviewers fail to meet the expectations of a competent review, scientific publications risk suffering the same fate as some journalistic publications, which is to become part of a growing cacophony of uninformed, biased, and often crass voices that strive for attention rather than knowledge.

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- Web-site 2** <http://www.icmje.org>
- Web-site 3** <http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/authorsview.authors/rights?tab=3#Duties>
- Web-site 4** http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/journaldescription.cws_home/717484/authorinstructions
- Web-site 5** http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/journaldescription.cws_home/506041/authorinstructions
- Web-site 6** <http://www.springer.com/authors/journal+authors?SGWID=0-154202-12-417499-0>
- Web-site 7** <http://publicationethics.org/>
- Web-site 8** (2011) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/01/karltheodor-zuguttenberg_n_829819.html
- Web-site 9** (2011/2012) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17558166>; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17586128>

Appendix: Typical authorship confirmation e-mail automatically sent by Springer Science and Business Media upon submission of a manuscript by the CA using the online submission system

"Dear Co-Author,

We have just received the submission entitled: "XYZ" for possible publication in *Plant Cell, Tissue & Organ Culture*, and you are listed as one of the co-authors.

Could you please verify that you are affiliated with this submission? Please respond through the links below.

If you are affiliated: <http://web-site1>

If you are NOT affiliated, please click this link: <http://web-site2>

Thank you very much for your kind attention and cooperation.

With best regards,
Springer
Journals Editorial office"