

Guest Editorial

Developing ALA's Journal Publication Ethics Policy

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This editorial shares how and why the American Library Association developed a Publication Ethics Policy for all its journals.

Background

The School Library Media Special Interest Group (SIG) presentations at the 2022 Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) Annual Conference focused on two different areas of school librarianship—diversity and ethics. Little did attendees know that the presentation on ethics would lead to policy changes at the American Library Association. Lucy Santos Green's conference presentation detailed the findings in an article she recently published with Melissa P. Johnston in the *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* (JASIST). Although Santos Green's presentation, "Upending Systems of Injustice: Educating Future School Library Researchers on Ethical Publishing for Scholarly Research" emphasized how to teach ethics, she also highlighted ethical misconduct in library and information science publishing.

Santos Green and Johnston's data set included all of the major LIS scholarly publishers including Taylor & Francis, Emerald, Elsevier, SAGE, and ALA. They identified 12 categories of editorial misconduct in the present literature:

- (1) citation coercion,
- (2) conflict of interest,
- (3) deliberate and avoidable delay in manuscript review,
- (4) editorial bias/confirmatory bias,
- (5) editorial policies not provided or spelled out,
- (6) encroachment on authorial integrity,
- (7) excessive secrecy of editorial office,
- (8) inappropriate review procedures/failure to observe due process,

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- (9) incorrect post-publication modification of articles,
- (10) lack of transparency in dealing with authors,
- (11) rejection without reason given, and
- (12) rewriting of article presented as copyediting.¹

The authors conducted a two-phase research analysis. The first phase consisted of a content analysis of public-facing ethics policies for 33 journals. None of the 6 ALA publications included a publishing ethics policy. The second phase of the research consisted of 31 informant interviews with 31 LIS authors. Analysis of the interviews found that ALA accounted for 55% of the documented editorial misconduct events.

Overall, the findings were damning for ALA publishing:

Perhaps the most surprising finding was the complete lack of any publishing ethics documentation, other than author guidelines and one general statement, for journals housed by the American Library Association divisions. The amount of editorial misconduct incidents collected during this study that occurred during interactions with professional organization journals (six journals responsible for over 55% of incidents) indicate their lack of publishing ethics documentation has had a disproportionate and adverse impact on LIS research. Because of experiences with editorial misconduct, multiple participants applied passive avoidance as a coping mechanism—choosing to no longer publish in these journals.²

A member of the ALA Publishing Committee was at the ALISE presentation and sent an email to the chair of the committee and the head of ALA Publishing soon after the conference concluded. It was clear that publishing policies needed to be implemented for all of ALA's journals. An agenda item was added to the committee's meeting two weeks later.

Process

The ALA Publishing Committee moved to form a subcommittee to draft the guidelines. In July 2023 the committee chair sent an invitation to editors and editorial board members of ALA publishing units, including *C&RL News*; *Children and Libraries*; *College & Research Libraries*; *ITAL: Information Technology and Libraries*; *Journal of Intellectual Freedom & Privacy*; *Knowledge Quest*; *LRTS: Library Resources & Technical Services*, *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*; *School Library Research*; and *YALS: Young Adult Library Services*. The invitation stated the subcommittee's charge as the creation of a draft publishing ethics policy, which ALA editors ultimately would implement for their publications. Representatives of each publication agreed to join, and the Publishing Committee members and staff liaisons agreed to support the subcommittee.

The Publishing Ethics Subcommittee first met virtually in September 2023, and members continued to communicate through the spring of 2024 as they formulated a draft. Subcommittee members agreed early on that it would benefit ALA to join the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), an international organization established to provide guidance on ethical issues that arise in journal publishing. To become a COPE member, publishers must adhere to COPE's Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing, among which is the requirement to have a publication ethics policy visible on the publisher's website.³ Adopting such an ethics policy not only would enable ALA's membership in COPE; it would represent

a crucial step toward assuring those who engaged with the association's publications that its standards for scholarly communications were ethical and transparent.

Using COPE's resources as a model, the subcommittee decided to limit the scope of the policy to ALA's peer-reviewed journals. Members drafted guidelines for the authors, peer reviewers, and editors of those journals. The draft also defined processes to help identify and handle ethical concerns, such as authorial or editorial misconduct, conflicts of interest, and post publication discussions and corrections.

In June 2024 the ALA Publishing Committee approved the subcommittee's policy draft in time for its inclusion in the committee's required biannual report to ALA Council. In the report, the committee also proposed the following action to be voted on by Council at the ALA Annual Conference later that month in San Diego:

Per the Publishing Committee charge, by which the committee "recommends policies on publishing for the approval of Council if revision or new policies are needed," the Publishing Committee requests that ALA Council approve the creation of an ALA journal publication ethics policy as association policy, permitting this new policy to be added to the ALA Policy Manual and ALA Publishing web page, and enabling the association to pursue membership in COPE.⁴

The chair of the Publishing Committee presented the action at the Council II meeting on June 30, 2024. Several councilors rose to speak in favor of the action before the Council overwhelmingly approved it. With this vote, responsibility for implementing the journal publication ethics policy shifted to the ALA Policy Monitoring Committee, which oversees additions and changes to the ALA Policy Manual.⁵

The Policy Monitoring Committee chair has informed the Publishing Committee that the new ethics policy will be inserted into the Policy Manual following a general revision and renumbering of the manual that is currently underway. At that time, ALA journal publishers will be able to point to the publication ethics guidance as official association policy and adopt it for their own websites. As part of its charge, the Publishing Committee also will continue to support the policy by mediating any "conflicting practices, inconsistencies, or irregularities it observes among the units its members represent."⁶

Purpose and Rationale

Please note that Santos Green and Johnston's findings *are not* that ALA's journal publishing practice is unethical. Their work implies that the organization, despite clear process for appointments and support for journal production and distribution, has allowed individual editors to handle the editorial and review functions of its journals rather informally. That informality has left a potential space for unintentional infractions. The article points out that an ethical standard requires intentional structure and action.

The Publication Ethics subcommittee is confident a publication ethics policy is a positive step toward reducing and eventually eliminating the problems documented by Santos Green and Johnston. Policies themselves are not merely abstractions or goals, but a basis for acceptable activity. Having an ethic and adopting a policy by itself does not guarantee the integrity of any single discrete decision, but it formalizes ALA's commitment to recognized standards for its journals and gives ALA's editors and editorial boards a basis for the work of publishing ALA's scholarly literature. It also provides for review, notice, and action, should ethical questions arise at any step of the publishing process.

The committee intends the policy to directly and indirectly benefit the organization as drafted. Though all benefits will not be realized immediately, like laying footings for a foundation, the policy provides a solid basis for ALA's scholarly and professional serials from several perspectives.

Standardizes Practice

The policy's chief purpose is as boundaries for acceptable practice. The document reinforces editorial review with a transparent, shared standard. It is a measure of trust in ourselves and our profession that for decades the organization has trusted its members to act ethically. That trust is not misplaced, but we are people, too, with liability to error and bias, even if imposed unconsciously. Since it is clear that ALA journal publication has ethical holes, for the first time organizational policy provides an expectational standard of editorial behavior applying across the constellation of ALA journals. Without sacrificing editorial independence or intruding into routine content decisions, the policy is a lodestar or guide rails to both author representation of their work and of editorial practice. No matter which division publishes a journal or in what field an article may be submitted, ALA and its journal editors now have a basis for judging acceptable and unacceptable practice through the complexities of journal publication.

Commitment to Inclusivity and Fairness

The policy provides ALA with a visibly public basis for expressing a fundamental doctrine of librarianship, a core standard guaranteeing disparate voices are formally heard in our discipline. The ALA Freedom to Read and drive for inclusivity are now formally reflected in publication policy. In short, the policy reinforces that publishing decisions are not made arbitrarily nor based on an editor's personal views. The policy should reassure authors and readers that the institution *has* a standard behind the myriad decisions involved in disseminating professional communications.

Interpretive Structure

As a document guiding individual action, the policy has two facets. On one hand it provides prospective authors with general guidance about writing practices expected in key journals of our field. On the other hand, it also provides ALA's editors and editorial boards with an ethical grounding for making editorial decisions with direction, for handling suspected ethical breaches in submissions, and provides policy grounds for taking action to correct ethical infractions.

Institutional Memory

Policies act as a formalized version of institutional memory. In this role the policy provides for two functions. First, it should ease the transition between succeeding journal editors, essentially serving as a training document. Its second role is a basis for self-development, a resource as new professionals begin exploring opportunities for involvement in the organization beyond readership.

Moving Forward—From the Editor

As a number of colleagues worked on this project, and as the *C&RL* Editor, it helped me see how all ALA editors would benefit from having this Publication Ethics Policy in place. I value having to ensure consistency and equity of treatment in working with authors, peer reviewers

and editorial board members. Although the ALA Publication Ethics Policy is not in the ALA Manual yet (but will be soon), I have already experienced situations in which this policy is useful for decision making and procedures to work through. When the ALA Publication Ethics Policy is published, it will be referred to in the *C&RL* web pages to assist all who interact with this journal. As with any policy, its power is in its implementation. As ALA journal editors engage with and practice the Policy, I believe it would also be helpful for the ALA editors to regroup after a year or so of its publication to assess how the ALA Publication Ethics Policy is supporting all parties involved and what might need to be revised. In spring 2025, a subcommittee of the Editorial Board will host a *C&RL* Peer Review workshop, and we will share the Publication Ethics Policy with regards to peer reviewers and expectations.

Notes

1. Lucy Santos Green and Melissa P. Johnston, "A Contextualization of Editorial Misconduct in the Library and Information Science Academic Information Ecosystem," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 73, no. 7 (2022): 914, <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24593>.
2. Santos Green and Johnston, 924.
3. Committee on Publication Ethics, "Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing," COPE, November 2022, <https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.1.12>.
4. American Library Association, "ALA CD#32," Virtual, LLX, and Annual Conference Council Meetings, accessed November 26, 2024, <https://www.ala.org/aboutala/virtual-llx-and-annual-conference-council-meetings-0>.
5. American Library Association. "ALA Policy Manual." Accessed December 4, 2024. <https://www.ala.org/aboutala/governance/policymanual>
6. American Library Association. "ALA Publishing Committee." Accessed November 26, 2024. <https://www.ala.org/aboutala/committees/ala/ala-pb>.