Reviewer’s report

Title: The advantages of peer review over arbitration for resolving authorship disputes

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Reviewer: Jason Roberts

Reviewer’s report:

Thank you for writing a thoroughly compelling commentary on both the issues of academic self-management of authorship issues and in responding to the proposals to develop a structure of arbitration as raised by Zen Faulkes in the provocative article entitled "Resolving authorship disputes by mediation and arbitration". I found the commentary well-thought out, convincing and more plausible than the model proposed by Faulkes. I also found you articulated many of my concerns regarding the Faulkes thesis: namely, arbitration would seem to be a sledgehammer approach in many cases; that it would cost money and it was utterly unrealistic to expect journals or publishers to pay for it, and that institutions themselves are best placed to provide a structure to resolve disputes. I found the commentary also explained some of the legal complexities of what arbitration entails, at least within the US. That was especially helpful.

I make very few requests for change:

I am not sure if you are able to describe what a peer review committee might look like and who typically sits on it and what, if any, training they may typically receive to do the job. A lot of readers of this journal actually work outside academia, such as within editorial offices or publishing and might not be familiar with such structures. A short summary would be helpful to help the reader better visualize what you refer to when you mention a peer review committee. As I read the Abstract I wondered what sort structures are put in place to make sure members of such committees are suitably qualified. Is that something you could also address in the article?

First paragraph of The Limits of Arbitration:

"This is doubtful because for-profit publishers are not interested in resolving disputes...." I have to disagree with that. Throughout my 20 year publishing/editorial office career I can list multiple occasions when publishers have got involved sometimes directly other times by heavily guiding an editorial office. I 100% agree they would have no interest in supporting an arbitration structure financially, and nor do I believe they should, but I think "no interest" is too strong. I would have used "reluctant" which is certainly closer to the truth.

You mention that ultimately the peer review members need not be tied to one institution and that potentially resolves my one concern with the approach proposed: that internal committees might be heavily biased and be directed to simply bury a dispute if the committee is entirely internal in membership composition. Plus, how would that resolve multi-center studies with a lot of authors,
perhaps even in different countries. Again, experience from within multiple editorial offices has taught me that institutions after initially promising to investigate very often go silent and one wonders if that is intentional to misdirect or hope the issue will blow over.

Would such committees have any power to recommend disciplinary action? Or would they simply comment on what they find and let others then take follow up action.

Ultimately, I do wish there could be greater focus placed on institutions educating their researcher-authors to understand how authorship works and how to take steps to guard against these problems. One cannot control for authors that "go rogue" but in many instances, if the researchers agreed on authorship before the research was undertaken, review what was agreed (and alter if needs be) at the point of writing the paper and then, once more, upon concluding the writing process, many of these disputes would be resolved before submission and/or publication. Indeed, the peer review aspect as discussed by Master and Tenenbaum might usefully be employed ahead of time before matters boil over and not in reaction to a dispute.

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