

The Problem with Permanent Expressions of Concern: Perpetual Doubt

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Abstract

The expression of concern (EoC) evolved in the neoliberal corrective culture of science to represent an “alert system” for potential problems with papers that might arise at the post-publication stage. One of the problems with EoCs is that they may take months or even years to resolve, while some EoCs remain as such forever. Fairly recently, Elsevier, a publishing giant, introduced a new form of EoCs, or rather, the plain EoC morphed into two types, the temporary EoC, and the permanent EoC. The permanent EoC leaves that paper in a permanent state of unknown use and unclear reliability.

Key words: corrections; literature integrity; misconduct; retractions; transparency.

To the Editor,

Academics, as the grassroots level of the publishing industry, are expected to appreciate how the world of publishing is evolving, for better or for worse. This is because trends and changes will surely impact their research and publication journey. One salient transformation in this academic generation is the cultural shift towards corrective measures. In academic publishing, available procedures to correct the literature are still rigid, or at least insufficiently flexible to accommodate evolving trends of doubt, error, or misconduct, limited primarily to corrigenda or errata, expressions of concern (EoCs), and retractions [1]. For this reason, given peer review’s imperfections make literature susceptible to critique at the post-publication stage, a double digital object identifier (DOI)-based method of publication was suggested, in which the second DOI would be a “live” document that would emerge, allowing for the publishing record to be updated at any time in the history of the article’s existence, serving as a transparent and effective corrective measure [2].

As we witness and participate in a growing culture of retractions, it is important to observe and critique, and in doing so, seek to improve corrective measures that have the ability to impact scientists, through citations [3]. Since a citation essentially reflects dependence on ideas, facts, or methodologies, the reliability or veracity of the cited document becomes central in publishing. It is incumbent

upon academics, as active members of the publication process, to critique policies that may ultimately impact them. As one example, concern was previously expressed about the “clustering” of multiple EoCs into a single DOI-based notice rather than a one EoC to one paper ratio [4]. While such a process is undoubtedly convenient to publishers when faced with mass doubt or fraud, it undermines the transparency of the process.

EoCs have typically come to serve as a temporary “warning” to readers or potential users of that paper that some issue(s) may be impacting its scientific (or other) integrity. However, if unfounded, that state of uncertainty can harm the authors of papers to which an EoC is attached, robbing them of the possibility of being cited. Conversely, potential users of papers associated with an EoC may be hesitant to cite that work. This dual harm is amplified when EoCs remain endlessly in an unresolved state. Surely, in such a situation, the double-DOI system of publication that adopts a more neutral stance, but that offers greater transparency and details about the process [2], would benefit academics more?

Elsevier, as one of the giants in the status quo publishing ecosystem, in some ways represents a trail-blazer because it adapts its practices to meet the cultural challenges of the moment. Given its legal prowess (Elsevier and LexisNexis, a law firm, are under the same umbrella parent company RELX), academics need to pay close attention to tweaks in the publishing culture made by Elsevier (and other status quo publishers) because

they may ultimately affect them, directly or indirectly. At some point, Elsevier introduced a new form of EoCs, or rather, the plain EoC morphed into two types, the temporary EoC, and the permanent EoC [5]. The precise date of this new “cultural” form of the correction of the literature is unknown since Elsevier (unfortunately) has not dated its document. Three known examples are noted [6-8]. To the author’s knowledge, no such dual-purpose EoC exists yet for other publishers, nor has such terminology been indicated formally by ethics organizations like COPE or the ICMJE.

In my opinion, the permanent EoC leaves that literature in a permanent state of unknown use and unclear reliability. While this decision may offer the editors, journal and publisher legal refuge – because sufficient self-protecting caution is exercised – it prolongs the agony of not knowing the intellectual destiny of that work. Surely academics prefer clarity and resolution to constant doubt? Unless of course, a permanent state of doubt is meant to introduce a Cartesian tint to the state of science, suggesting that the underlying knowledge is false, but always tending on a trajectory to appreciate its state of truth [9]. If the perception of “reasonable doubt” [10] were to be applied, while accepting the fallibility of knowledge, then it is possible to envision that a wide swathe of published literature might need to have an EoC attached to it, given human imperfections that populate science and academia.

In some ways, publishing is not unlike the social and geopolitical trends that we are witnessing, and in many respects is influenced by and is susceptible to them. Academics are

usually marginalized – because they are not included in policy-making – by tectonic shifts in policies, especially those that relate to ethics, and are thus at the whim of decisions made by publishers and their legal departments, or ethics organizations that cement such policies globally, usually autocratically. Surely, in this day and age of diversity, inclusivity and equity, is it not advisable for publishers to consult and interact with a wider span of the academic base before deciding and implementing policies that may merely add a layer of complexity without necessarily resolving core issues?

In my assessment, the permanent EoC brings no added value to the culture of knowledge correction. Instead, editors and publishers need to be much more decisive, acting on available evidence, but not leaving academic works (and their authors) in a permanent state of uncertainty and anxiety [11, 12].

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