The technology for electronic communication, such as the Internet and the computer software used with it, continued to evolve rapidly and dramatically in 1998, creating new tensions and controversies in scientific publishing and breathing new life into older issues.

Copyright Ownership

Copyright was a recurring theme. Increasingly, scholars are suggesting that the wide availability of electronic communication demands that the traditional system of handling copyright of scholarly papers be rethought.

In the 4 September issue of Science, 12 scholars published an essay calling for the federal government to take steps to loosen publishers’ control of the articles that they publish (1). The scholars said that the federal government should encourage or even require scientists that receive federal grants to refuse to surrender copyright of their papers to academic journals. Instead, the scholars said, authors should give journals a license to publish their papers. That would leave authors free to post their papers on the World Wide Web or to disseminate them by other means. Journal editors said that such a change would wreak havoc with authors who need to get permission to reprint articles and would make it difficult for publishers to develop new information products that would incorporate journal articles.

There was little indication that federal agencies would act on the suggestion. For example, Rita Colwell, the new director of the National Science Foundation, ducked the question when asked about the proposal at a gathering of science journalists in Washington shortly after the essay was published.

However, some universities might take the issue into their own hands. Steven E Koonin, provost of the California Institute of Technology, proposed that Caltech and its faculty authors jointly retain the copyright to papers submitted to journals. The university would have enough clout to force journal publishers to accede, says Mr Koonin. But some object that, under Mr Koonin’s proposal, faculty authors would simply be trading one overlord for another. Caltech faculty were scheduled to debate the proposal in a private online forum through 31 December. David E Shulenburger, provost of the University of Kansas, has made a similar proposal to his university’s regents.

Electronic Postings

Academics also continued to expand their use of electronic repositories for preprints of scholarly articles. For example, Stevan Harnad, a professor of psychology at Princeton University and the University of Southampton, unveiled a new Web-based repository for papers in cognitive sciences. And in September, the Association for Computing Machinery announced that it will sponsor a repository of computer-science preprints using software from the wildly popular e-print server at Los Alamos National Laboratory. Papers in the repository are not peer-reviewed, but an author can easily submit a paper in the repository to a journal for review and publication.

In October, the British Medical Journal (BMJ) became the first major medical journal to review a submitted paper in full public view on the Web. The journal posted a paper by Ronald E LaPorte, of the University of Pittsburgh, that dealt with the likely effects of the growth of information technology on medical journals. Visitors to BMJ’s Web site could post public comments on the paper, and the journal’s editors promised to consider the comments when deciding whether to accept the paper for publication in the paper version of BMJ although the journal was asking traditional peer reviewers to vet the paper as well.

Many journals post copies of their articles on line only after the printed version has been released. But in January, the American Chemical Society (ACS) started posting articles from its 26 journals on the Web as soon as they were ready to be posted, even if print publication was still weeks away. The arrangement also shortened the length of time journalists have embargoed advance access to the text of papers.

Libraries and Journals

The rising cost of academic journals continued to worry university librarians. In April, the International Coalition of Library Consortia issued a statement that criticized the high prices of electronic versions of scholarly journals. The statement said that an electronic version of a publication should cost less than the printed version, that libraries should have the choice of subscribing only to the electronic version, and that libraries should have a freer hand in using the electronic versions than is now permitted by publishers.

In one attempt to put pressure on commercial publishers to cut their rates, the Association of Research Libraries formed the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC), a group of research libraries in the United States, Canada, and Europe. In July, SPARC announced that it would cooperate with ACS in an effort to produce a new organic-chemistry journal with a relatively low subscription charge. The library group is not providing any direct financial assistance to Organic Letters, but each of the group’s member libraries has agreed in advance to subscribe, and this is expected to provide a solid financial base for the new journal.
In November, ACS appointed Amos B Smith III, a professor of chemistry at the University of Pennsylvania, as the journal’s first editor.

In July, Elsevier Science announced that it will allow university libraries to use electronic versions of its journals in fulfilling requests for interlibrary loans of journal articles. Usually when a library needs an article from a journal to which it does not subscribe, it can request a photocopy of the article from a university that does subscribe to the printed edition. But Elsevier, the world’s largest publisher of scientific journals, had forbidden university libraries to share printouts or electronic files from electronic versions of its journals. Librarians complained about that policy, so Elsevier modified the policy to allow a university to share printouts from electronic journals.

**Other News**

In October, a federal judge ruled against Uncover, a subsidiary of Dialog Corporation, in a lawsuit that had been lodged by 4 freelance writers. Uncover sells copies of articles from journals and other periodicals with the consent of the publications’ publishers, but the writers argued that they had not been granted permission to redistribute articles that they had written. The judge, in a preliminary ruling in the case, held that copyright law requires the author’s permission. The ruling’s implications for academic journals are unclear; unlike writers for magazines and newspapers, academic authors routinely sign all copyright ownership of their articles over to the journals that publish them.

And in Washington, in its headlong rush to adjourn, Congress did not enact the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, which would bring the United States into compliance with 2 treaties on electronic copyright. The House of Representatives version of the bill included a provision, which many academics found objectionable, that would have required payment or permission to use personal information in a database. The issue did not die with the adjournment, however; Congress is expected to take up the bill again this year.

### Reference


---

**Common Aims/Different Languages:**

**Increasing Understanding Among Medical Journals, Academia, and Industry**


**Liz Wager**

Medical Writer

Janssen-Cilag Ltd

High Wycombe, United Kingdom

Medical journals, academics, and the pharmaceutical industry depend on each other in many ways, yet their relationship is characterized by distrust. This is reinforced when egregious behaviors occur (for example, companies suppress unfavorable findings, academics fabricate clinical data, or journal editors reject papers but steal their ideas). This retreat was not about recounting horrific tales but about trying to understand why the different constituencies act as they do and reaching agreement where possible.

The meeting was the brainchild of Leni Grossman, of Merck, who was concerned that the pharmaceutical industry was poorly represented at CBE meetings and that discussions about companies’ misdemeanors were therefore one-sided. She felt that more productive communication could occur with more nearly equal representation of journals, academia, and industry and therefore, with the blessing of CBE and support from her employers, set up the meeting after initial discussions at the 1997 peer-review congress.

To get us started, Harry Marks of Johns Hopkins University gave a fascinating account of the history of pharmaceutical-industry collaboration with academia. He outlined the reasons for academics’ distrust of commercial organizations and the philosophical tensions between business and medical science.

**Panels from the 3 Groups**

A panel from each constituency then had the floor in turn for an hour to present “the view from here”. This was followed by lively general discussion.

The academics panel (David Moher, Kay Dickersin, Mildred Cho, Faith McLellan, and Laura McAuley) spoke about:

- publication bias and the importance of including “gray literature” (such as abstracts and unpublished reports) in systematic reviews
- investigators’ and companies’ failure to publish negative findings
- companies’ attempts to suppress publications
- the need for clinical-trial registers
- authors’ poor understanding of peer-review publications
- pressures on academics to secure commercial funding
- difficulties in applying International Committee of Medical Journal Editors authorship criteria