Short Communication

Evolving Journal Policies for Ethical Use of Generative AI in Scientific Publishing

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Abstract

The rapid integration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT into academic writing has created an ethical grey zone for authors, reviewers, and editors. While these tools can enhance clarity and language, their unchecked use raises serious concerns about authorship, accountability, plagiarism, and data fabrication. Yet, the editorial community remains divided: Should AI-assisted writing be treated as ghost authorship? Can reviewers ethically use AI for peer review summaries? Do journals require disclosure only when AI is used by authors, or also when used during editorial workflows? Amid these unresolved tensions, leading medical journals and editorial bodies such as COPE and WAME are introducing policies that vary widely in clarity and enforcement. Some allow AI for grammar correction; others prohibit its use entirely in data interpretation. However, most journals lack consistent language on how to declare, limit, or audit AI use — leaving authors confused and reviewers unregulated. This short communication explores the gaps in current journal policies on AI use and calls for unified, transparent guidelines that balance innovation with integrity. We advocate for a three-tiered declaration system: (1) AI-assisted writing, (2) AI-generated content, and (3) AI use in peer review and editorial decision-making. As medical education and public health researchers increasingly turn to AI for manuscript preparation, the editorial community must act quickly to avoid reputational risks and uphold trust in the publishing process.

Introduction

In an era where the credibility of academic publishing is under constant scrutiny, robust publication policies and a vigilant editorial board are more than administrative necessities. They are the backbone of trust, transparency, and scholarly integrity.[1] When thoughtfully crafted, these policies ensure consistent editorial decision-making, uphold manuscript quality, and reinforce the reputation of journals in a competitive and rapidly evolving academic landscape.[2] Beyond setting procedural standards, clear and inclusive policies help editors make timely, fair decisions and guide authors and reviewers through ethical and professional expectations. Transparency, inclusivity, and alignment with global editorial frameworks—

such as those from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME)—are now essential hallmarks of responsible publishing.[2] To be effective, these policies must be communicated clearly, implemented with stakeholder input, and supported by proper training and timely dissemination across platforms, including journal websites. As scientific publishing enters the age of generative artificial intelligence (AI), traditional policy frameworks face new pressures. Tools like ChatGPT and other large language models (LLMs) are reshaping how manuscripts are written, reviewed, and even evaluated.[3] While these technologies promise to streamline editorial workflows and enhance linguistic quality, they also raise complex ethical questions around authorship, accountability, data integrity, and transparency. Recognizing this dual-edged potential, several leading journals and publishing boards have introduced AI-specific guidelines to govern how such technologies may be ethically integrated into the publication process. These evolving policies aim to strike a balance between innovation and integrity by emphasizing human oversight, transparency in AI usage, and strict adherence to ethical standards.[4]

Most policies now require that any use of AI be clearly disclosed in the methods section of a manuscript, particularly when used for language editing or summarization. They also apply broadly, not just to textual content, but to audiovisual materials, data representations, peer review reports, and other scholarly outputs.[5] Authors are reminded that AI may improve readability but cannot replace critical academic tasks such as data interpretation or scientific reasoning. Human responsibility remains non-negotiable. As AI becomes increasingly embedded in the research ecosystem, journal policies must evolve accordingly—not only to prevent misuse but to guide its ethical adoption in ways that protect scientific rigor and uphold academic trust.

Main Text

Implementing AI Policy in Manuscript Submission and Editorial Workflow

As generative AI becomes increasingly integrated into the scholarly publishing process, journals must adopt clear, enforceable procedures to operationalize their AI policies. The following sections outline essential components that ensure ethical implementation—from author disclosure and editorial oversight to enforcement mechanisms. These practices aim to preserve the integrity of the publication process while embracing the responsible use of emerging technologies.

Table 1: Key Components of Effective AI Integration Policies in Scholarly Journals[6,7]

Category	Key Components	Rationale
Generative AI Integrtion	Disclosure of AI use Limit AI use to language and readability enhancements	Preserves authorship integrity Prevents AI misuse in scientific content creation
Scope of AI Policies	Applies to all submission types and formats	Ensures consistency and fairness across all content types
Author Rsponsibities	Human supervision of AI-generated content Prohibit AI in data analysis or scientific interpretation	Maintains accuracy, eliminates bias, and upholds scientific rigor
Citation & Supplemtary Data	Mandatory citation of AI tools used Upload full AI output as supplementary file	Promotes transparency, reproducibility, and traceability of AI involvement
Reviewer & Editor Guidelines	Prohibit use of AI in peer review or editorial decision-making	Safeguards confidentiality and preserves independent human judgment
Compliance & Cosquenes	Require ethical AI use by authors and editors Non-compliance may result in manuscript rejection or retraction	Reinforces accountability and ensures adherence to journal policy
Ongoing Policy Etion	Periodic review and updating of AI policies to reflect advancements	Keeps editorial standards current and aligned with ethical and technological developments

Ethical Use and Disclosure of Generative AI

If generative AI tools are employed in drafting a manuscript, authors must disclose their use clearly and cite the specific software.[7] Transparency enhances trust among authors, reviewers, editors, and readers, and ensures compliance with software terms of use. As per global editorial consensus, generative AI cannot be listed as an author.[8] Authors are required to follow standardized software citation templates, detailing in the methods section how, when, and to what extent AI tools were used. Additionally, the complete AI-generated content must be submitted as supplementary material.

Editorial and Reviewer Responsibilities

Editors and reviewers bear a critical responsibility in assessing the appropriate use of AI. They must verify the accuracy of AI-generated content while upholding the confidentiality and integrity of the peer-review process. Editors are strictly prohibited from entering any submitted manuscript content or peer-review reports into AI tools like ChatGPT. Similarly, reviewers are not permitted to generate review content using such platforms.[9] These measures are essential to preserve editorial independence and prevent data breaches.

Policy Enforcement and the Path Forward

To ensure compliance, journals must enforce these AI-related policies through clear author guidelines and transparent editorial decisions. Any misuse or undisclosed use of AI may result in editorial action, including rejection or retraction.[10] While AI offers advantages in areas such as language support and plagiarism detection, it must not replace human judgment. Ongoing dialogue, periodic policy updates, and global standardization will be vital to manage the evolving role of AI in scientific publishing while safeguarding scholarly integrity.

Conclusion

The rise of generative AI in academic publishing demands urgent policy adaptation that balances innovation with scholarly integrity. Journals must lead this change by developing transparent, enforceable, and ethically grounded AI policies. Clear disclosure protocols, human accountability, and standardized guidelines across editorial processes are essential to mitigate risks of misinformation, authorship dilution, and data misrepresentation. As AI technologies evolve, so too must our publication frameworks—rooted not only in efficiency but in trust. Future collaborations among global editorial bodies will be crucial to ensuring these technologies uplift, rather than undermine, the foundations of scientific communication.

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