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Introduction to the AIS Code of Research Conduct

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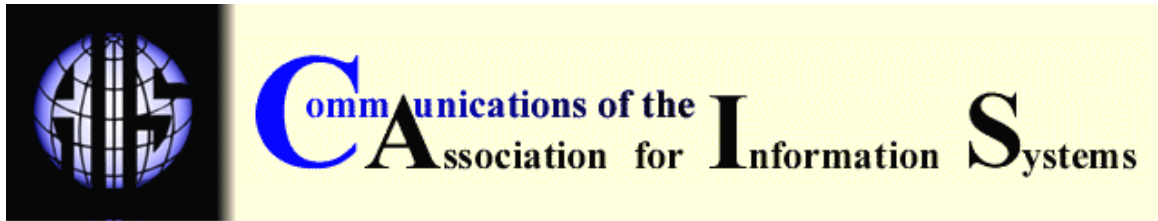
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INTRODUCTION TO THE AIS CODE OF RESEARCH CONDUCT

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss the AIS Code of Research Conduct approved by AIS Council at its December 2003 meeting. We explain the purpose of the Code, its focus, who developed the code, and indicate the participation of many leading scholars in our community. We discuss how the Code may be used as an instrument to assist in maintaining the integrity of our journals and conference proceedings. We identify processes by which scholars who were victimized may seek redress and, in the Appendix, how the editors involved may deal with alleged offenders. The adoption of this code of research conduct is an important step in the maturing of our IS community.

Keywords: code, research conduct, development and dissemination, plagiarism

I. PURPOSE OF THE CODE

A few years ago, one of the authors (Malcolm Munro) participated in a field study of appropriate and inappropriate Internet usage in the workplace. The field interviews made one thing clear: the vast majority of users are not abusers. People want to know what behavior is expected of them, and by and large are more than happy to oblige if guidelines are provided.

This lesson became a guiding principle in the effort of the Association for Information Systems in responding to a few reported cases of plagiarism in the Association's journals and conference proceedings. AIS offers the Code as a service to our scholarly community in the belief that it will be of value in encouraging ethical behavior in the research arena. The Code of Research Conduct thus serves as a reference for scholars in executing research projects and preparing manuscripts for publication.

The Code focuses exclusively on research conduct. It does not provide behavioral guidelines for teaching, professional work, or other aspects of an academic's daily workplace. It does not address the broader issue of what constitutes acceptable ethical behavior generally. We recognize the importance of these issues, but they are outside our mandate.

II. HOW THE CODE WAS DEVELOPED

In 2002, AIS Council received reports that three papers appearing in AIS publications contained material that may have involved plagiarism. While these events were dealt with on a one-off basis, they served to sensitize AIS Council to the absence of a policy for dealing with such issues and, in general, the absence of a code of behavior for our scholarly community. In contrast, many other academic societies put codes of ethics in place many years ago. For a list of such codes, the reader is invited to follow the hyperlink to the Research Ethics page on ISWorld (<http://www.is.cityu.edu.hk/research/resources/isworld/ethics/index.htm>)

Initially, an ad hoc committee consisting of Joey George (as chair), Malcolm Munro, Cynthia Beath, Jon Heales and Robert Davison prepared a report for AIS Council [George, et al., 2003]. The report recommended that a permanent AIS "standing committee" be established to formulate a process to deal with scholarly misbehavior in AIS publications and to undertake the development of a code of research conduct. AIS Council formed the Research Conduct Committee (RCC) which consists of the AIS Vice President (Publications), AIS Vice President (Meetings and Conferences), and a third member at large appointed by then AIS President Phillip Ein-Dor. Currently these members are, respectively, Detmar Straub, Malcolm Munro, and Robert Davison, Section Co-Editor of the research ethics page on ISWorld Net. Malcolm Munro was selected as chairperson by the committee.

The committee recognized at the outset that it would be quite difficult to devise a code of conduct that would fairly reflect legal, cultural and philosophical differences throughout the world. We widely circulated drafts of the Code for comment including soliciting opinion on ISWorld. We also noted the absence of unanimity even among highly experienced researchers in many aspects of research conduct. Overall, however, we believe that the Code reflects a consensus of senior scholars and ethics specialists.

The Code, presented in the next article (Volume 13, Article 2) consists of two main categories, each of which includes several individual items. The categories and the code items are roughly organized according to what one commenter described as the "outrage factor", i.e., how "outraged" the community would be if that code item was violated or ignored.

- Category One includes behaviors which must be always adhered to. Disregarding any of them constitutes a serious ethical breach.
- Category Two includes recommended ethical behaviors. Disregarding any of them would be disapproved by our scholarly community.
- Category Three, titled "Good Advice", suggests ways to be proactive in avoiding research difficulties and ethical dilemmas.

III. DISSEMINATING THE CODE

As the Code was just approved in December 2003 by AIS Council, the Committee did not yet take formal steps to disseminate it among AIS editors. However, we anticipate that editors of AIS journals and conference proceedings will display the code prominently in their "Instructions to Authors" and "Call for Papers". We will work out the details with each editor on an individual basis. In addition, we anticipate that editors of many other IS publications will be interested in displaying the Code. In fact, from a poll of over 30 current and past senior editors of journals and conference proceedings, we became aware that the Code could play a useful role in directly enhancing the scholarly integrity of such outlets. Apparently, many editors feel their publication lacks a satisfactory way to have authors attest that they are the true and original author(s) of work they submit for publication. Clearly, editors welcome a code of conduct which encompasses not only original authorship but also a variety of other research-related behaviors.

IV. HELPING VICTIMS AND EDITORS DEAL WITH PLAGIARISM

Several articles over the past decade describe plagiarism events [eg., Field, 1993; Kock 1999]. Among other things, these articles reveal that neither victims nor editors have clear ideas or procedures for dealing with alleged plagiarism. Individuals who feel their work was plagiarized are confused as to how to prove their original authorship, whom they should contact, what redress they should demand, and whether or not legal action should be undertaken. They are sometimes even shocked by counterclaims by the plagiarizer and by their need to prove that they are the original author. Editors, most of whom have never dealt with a case of plagiarism, are often uncertain as to how to deal with scholars contending authorship authenticity or content originality, what steps should be taken to redress an injustice, or what action if any should be taken against a transgressor.

To assist victims, the committee also prepared an article titled *Guidelines for a Victim: Dealing with Plagiarism* [AIS Committee on Research Guidelines, 2004b] published as the article after next in CAIS. It is also available on the Web at http://www.aisnet.org/conduct/Plagiarism_Guidelines.htm. This article suggests that a victim of plagiarism give careful thought at the beginning to be certain that he or she was plagiarized, and that the consequences are sufficiently serious to warrant what may be a time-consuming and stressful process. The article provides advice regarding how to prove that plagiarism occurred and the evidence that must be accumulated to prove original authorship. The document also counsels whom to involve in the home institution, how to deal with editors, and what actions are appropriate in dealing with the transgressor and that person's own institution. As with the guidelines for editors, each situation will be different and each wronged individual must decide the appropriateness of any given step.

To assist editors, AIS Council adopted the AIS Research Conduct Committee Process Guidelines shown in Appendix 1 of this article and posted at http://www.aisnet.org/conduct/Committee_Guidelines.htm [Davison, Munro, and Straub, 2003]. The guidelines describe the process recommended for dealing with plagiarism or other egregious acts of scholarly misconduct. In this guideline, editors are provided with a framework to deal with allegations of plagiarism. The term "framework" is used advisedly since each such event will have its own unique participants, circumstances, and severity. Each editor will need to employ judgment concerning actions to be taken. However if the editor is unable to resolve a case satisfactorily, the editor may refer the issue to the AIS President. If the President refers the matter to the Research Conduct Committee, the Committee will apply specific criteria to determine whether or not to examine the case. If the Committee decides to consider the case and is unable to resolve the matter, it may lodge a formal complaint with the alleged transgressor's university thereby invoking institutional mechanisms commonly in place for dealing with scholarly misconduct. Depending on the outcome, the Committee may formulate recommendations to AIS Council to provide redress to the victim and sanctions against the transgressor. Important control features in this process are that the Committee may only address cases referred to it by the AIS President, and that sanctions the Committee may recommend against any transgressor must be approved by AIS Council as a whole.

Access to this process may not be limited to editors of AIS publications. Editors of non-AIS publications may also apply to the AIS President to have individual cases of alleged plagiarism dealt with by the Research Conduct Committee.

V. THE FUTURE

The Committee will revisit the Code on a regular basis and revise it as experience suggests. The Committee welcomes any comments or insights you may care to provide, especially if you are or were directly involved in a case involving scholarly misconduct either as a victim or an editor. You may direct your feedback or other queries to the chairperson of the Research Conduct Committee (researchconduct@aisnet.org)

Editor's Note: This article was received on December 15, 2003 and was published on January 6, 2004.

REFERENCES

EDITOR'S NOTE: The text and the reference list that follows contains the address of World Wide Web pages. Readers who have the ability to access the Web directly from their computer or are reading the paper on the Web, can gain direct access to these references. Readers are warned, however, that

1. these links existed as of the date of publication but are not guaranteed to be working thereafter.
2. the contents of Web pages may change over time. Where version information is provided in the References, different versions may not contain the information or the conclusions referenced.
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AIS Research Conduct Committee [2004b] "Guidelines for a Victim: Dealing with Plagiarism". *Communications of the Association for Information Systems* (13)3

Davison, R.M., M. C. Munro, and D.W. Straub (2003b) "Guidelines for a Victim: Dealing with Plagiarism" (<http://mgis.mgmt.ucalgary.ca/ais/victimguidelins.htm>)

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APPENDIX I. AIS RESEARCH CONDUCT COMMITTEE – PROCESS GUIDELINES

An editor of an AIS publication receiving a complaint or evidence of plagiarism (or other scholarly misconduct) shall notify the alleged offender and attempt to resolve the matter. If the matter is not resolved, the editor, or complainant, may submit the matter to the AIS President, who shall determine whether or not to refer the matter to the AIS Research Conduct Committee (RCC). If the matter is considered by the RCC, the Committee will determine whether to dismiss the allegation, or to request a formal investigation by the alleged offender's institution. All parties concerned will be notified of the committee's decision. If an investigation concludes that misconduct or plagiarism did occur, the Committee will recommend appropriate action to AIS Council, and in the event of plagiarism, request that the editor restores attribution of the work to

the original author and remove, as far as possible, the offending work from the journal's archival base. Sanctions against those found to have behaved unethically may include expulsion from the Association and/or being barred from publishing in any of the Association's journals or proceedings or from registering at any of the Association's sponsored conferences.

PREAMBLE

The Research Conduct Committee, a standing committee of the Association for Information Systems, investigates allegations of scholarly misconduct, especially plagiarism, in connection with journals and proceedings for which the AIS holds copyright, at the request of the AIS President. The Committee consists of the Vice President (Publications), Vice President (Meetings and Conferences) and a third member appointed by the AIS Executive Committee. The Committee selects its own chair.

These guidelines embody the principle that every effort should be made to resolve disputes without resort to formal complaint or investigation. However, we may not be able to reasonably assume that researchers in all countries are informed, or even agree, as to what constitutes acceptable professional practice. Even experienced scholars are sometimes in dispute over what constitutes ethical behavior. So, while sanctions may be appropriate in some cases, counseling and discussion may be appropriate in others. In general, AIS members are expected to comply with the [AIS Code of Research Conduct](#) [AIS Research Conduct Committee, 2004] which provides a basis for ethical scholarly practice. The RCC regards the Code of Research Conduct not as a set of narrow rules upon which complaints of scholarly misconduct may be based but rather as a source of guidance for the scholarly community. Conditions which must be met for complaints of scholarly misconduct to be investigated are indicated herein.

These guidelines are an amended version of a section of the report of the Committee on Ethical Misconduct [George, et al. 2003] published in *Communications of the AIS*. Where the two documents contradict each other, the guidelines below shall supercede. See *Guidelines for a Victim: Dealing with Plagiarism* [AIS Committee for Research Conduct, 2002b] for advice on steps to be taken by those who feel their work has been plagiarized.

Normally, the RCC will only consider cases referred by the AIS President. If the Committee is unable to resolve the matter, it may at its discretion initiate a formal complaint with an alleged offender's institution. This approach accommodates the limited resources of the Association, especially problematic in time-consuming complex cases, and depends upon academic institutions with their greater resources and ability to command evidence to bring about a final resolution. This approach also limits the legal exposure of Association officers and shifts much of the legal exposure to the institution of the alleged offender. While this process may also shift the initiative for a final decision to the investigating University, the process may be fairer to the individual being investigated since institutional mechanisms should provide the opportunity for a personal appearance by the respondent, appeals to the process, and protection of the respondent's rights through the possible participation of a union or association representative. Last, also note that should the Committee decide at any stage to take no further action, this in no way precludes a complainant from directly requesting a formal inquiry from an alleged offender's university.

Each case of alleged member misconduct is expected to have unique aspects and it is impossible to provide a "one size fits all" procedure. In fact, these guidelines are perhaps most suitable for cases where documentary evidence can be obtained to establish authorship or other misconduct with a high degree of certainty. However, misconduct occurs in varying degrees of severity and in many different forms. In cases where the misconduct is less egregious, very difficult to ascertain, genuinely disputable, or the complainant can be satisfied by a relatively modest solution, less formal remedies and processes should be used if possible. At the same time however, we cannot overlook the interests of the publication(s) involved, the Association, an offender's own institution, and the broader ethical concerns of the discipline, any of which may demand more severe or more public sanctions. In general, the process should keep all parties informed and allow an

alleged offender to take responsibility before a more serious step in the process occurs. Editors and the RCC should adapt the process to fit each individual case while preserving the important principles of the guidelines described.

Editors of non-AIS publications are free to adopt in whole or in part the AIS Code of Research Conduct and the procedures described herein. However these processes, guidelines, or such "rules" as they may imply, are not intended to apply to, or otherwise inappropriately interfere with, non-AIS publications. Editors or publishers of non-AIS publications may apply to the AIS President on a case-by-case basis for the adjudication by the RCC of allegations of scholarly misconduct in their own publications. At the same time, a finding of misconduct by a non-AIS journal of an AIS member or non-member may result in sanctions against such individuals by AIS Council.

Throughout this document, the expression "plagiarism" may also refer generally to all forms of scholarly misconduct, and particularly to violations of the AIS Code of Research Conduct.

1. EDITOR CONSIDERS COMPLAINT INITIALLY

An editor receiving a complaint including evidence of plagiarism or other scholarly misconduct shall notify all parties concerned and attempt to resolve the dispute or allegation. If the matter is not resolved to the editor's satisfaction, the editor shall refer the matter to the AIS President for examination by the Research Conduct Committee. If the matter is not resolved to the complainant's satisfaction, after having first submitted the allegation to an editor, the complainant may also directly request that the AIS President refers the matter to RCC.

Whether an editor has published an article that is alleged to involve plagiarism of another author's work, or alternatively has published an article that is alleged to have been plagiarized elsewhere, the editor's responsibility is to establish if plagiarism has occurred, determine who the original author is, and provide such remedy as is appropriate for the injured party and the journal.

An editor may receive an allegation of plagiarism (or other scholarly misconduct) directly from a complainant or from some other source such as an associate editor, reviewer, or observant scholar. If the editor examines the available evidence and concludes that the evidence or the alleged misconduct itself is not compelling, the complainant should be so advised. Otherwise the editor should advise the complainant that the matter will be pursued, and shall contact the alleged offender for an explanation. In doing so, the editor should remain neutral, making no accusations and refraining from revealing the source of the complaint, but should advise the respondent that if no satisfactory explanation is provided or resolution implemented in a prompt manner, the matter may be referred to the RCC. (Note: if it is unclear as to who is the offender, the editor is advised to contact all parties involved and request evidence regarding authorship). In general, the editor should remain neutral while providing an opportunity for the offender to take responsibility for the matter. An editor may wish to inform an alleged offender that a publisher may also choose to take legal action in unresolved cases, which in the USA can result in penalties up to US \$100,000 per instance in addition to legal costs.

If further evidence is received but does not explain the allegation to the editor's satisfaction, the editor shall notify the alleged offender(s) and complainant(s) that the matter may be referred to RCC. If no response is received within a reasonable period, the editor will then contact the AIS President and request an examination of the evidence by RCC. The editor of the AIS publication should notify the editor of any other journal involved (if appropriate), cite the articles and authors in question, and indicate that the matter has been referred to the AIS President for possible consideration by RCC.

Alternatively, if the complaint is resolved to the editor's satisfaction, the editor shall so inform the complainant and the AIS President, who may refer the matter to the RCC regarding the need for further sanctions against the offender as described in step 3 below. If a complainant is dissatisfied with an outcome, the complainant may directly apply to the AIS President to have the allegation referred to RCC.

2. RESEARCH CONDUCT COMMITTEE CONSIDERS EVIDENCE

The Research Conduct Committee decides if sufficient evidence exists to request a formal investigation by the alleged offender's institution; all parties are notified.

RCC shall only consider a case if requested by the AIS President. In such an event, all evidence gathered by the editor, complainant, and respondent will be examined by the Committee. RCC may also request additional evidence from either the complainant or the alleged offender.

The Committee should be able to answer **each** of the following questions positively to justify further inquiry:

1. Has sufficient evidence been submitted to conclude that plagiarism, or other scholarly misconduct may have occurred?
2. Is the alleged misconduct sufficiently serious to justify pursuing?
3. Is there a reasonable prospect of resolution, even in the event of a formal institution-based investigation?

If the RCC cannot answer each of these three questions positively, and there exist no other compelling circumstances, the RCC shall inform the complainant (and/or the editor) accordingly or that no further action may be taken unless more compelling evidence is made available.

Otherwise, if the answers each of the three questions positively, the RCC shall notify the alleged offender that if exculpatory evidence is not provided promptly, the RCC may inform the alleged offender's dean (or academic supervisor if a student is involved), vice-president (academic) or equivalent, and request a formal investigation. If no satisfactory response is provided in a prompt manner, the RCC shall proceed to notify the above parties as indicated, submit the available evidence and request a formal investigation. This should trigger the institutional mechanisms at that institution for the investigation of academic misconduct. RCC may also consider the option of referring the matter back to the editor instead should the Committee feel the editor may now be able to effect a solution acceptable to all parties. Alternatively, RCC may choose to work directly with a respondent to resolve a complaint or allegation if this approach seems to be more appropriate.

The editor, complainant and the respondent shall be notified of the outcome of the RCC's deliberations and actions, if any. If an investigation has been requested, RCC shall remain in contact with the alleged offender's institution until the matter has been properly investigated, a resolution provided or it becomes apparent that no resolution will be forthcoming from the institution concerned. In the latter case, RCC may still choose at its discretion to advise AIS Council to recommend steps to redress the victim, restore the integrity of the publication involved, and/or sanction the offending individual, as described below.

3. EDITOR OR ASSOCIATION PROVIDES REDRESS

If an allegation is upheld, the editor shall be advised to provide redress in consultation with the victim. The Association may consider further disciplinary steps.

If an offender admits misconduct at any stage, or an allegation is upheld by an institutional investigation, RCC may recommend appropriate actions to AIS Council. If an institutional investigation provides no definitive result, RCC may still choose to recommend sanctions based on its own examination of the evidence available. Sanctions in either case may include that the editor be advised to redress the injustice done to the victim. In such an event, the editor should fully consult with the victim as to the redress desired. Generally, for an electronic journal, this would likely include removal of the entire offending article from the archive with an authorship correction to appear in its place along with a link to the original author's article; for a hardcopy journal, an announcement regarding the plagiarism and the original authorship and discontinuance of reprints of the offending article. Further disciplinary steps for an offender which RCC may recommend to AIS Council might include expulsion from the Association and/or barring that individual from publishing in any of the Association's journals or proceedings or from registering at any of the Association's sponsored conferences. If the research work on which a plagiarizing article is based was funded by an agency (whether local, regional, national or international), the agency should also be informed by the Chair of the RCC. The Chair of RCC shall provide a detailed report to AIS Council on each case submitted to the Committee.

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