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◆ Research article

Hidden in Plain Sight: Networked Power, Funding, and Accountability in Post-Publication Commentary

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1. Independent Scholar, Publication Ethics and Research Integrity

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Abstract

Public post-publication criticism now operates through a connected ecosystem of article-linked platforms, journalism sites, personal and pseudonymous publications, nonprofit organisations, consultants, conferences, funders, publisher integrity teams, databases, dashboards, and scholarly infrastructure. This article maps publicly documented organisational, financial, professional, recognition, dissemination, and data relationships across that ecosystem. It combines comparative institutional analysis, qualitative relationship mapping, and conceptual incentive analysis while separating documented fact from inference and unverified hypothesis. The record does not establish a secret controller, coordinated targeting, or misconduct. It does establish recurring roles, resource flows, organisational concentration, cross-publication pathways, and the conversion of public commentary into persistent institution-facing data and services. These features create networked authority: a single concern can travel through connected outlets and acquire the appearance of corroboration without receiving independent evidentiary support. The problem is therefore not that a network must be clandestine to matter; it is that integrated influence can coexist with fragmented accountability. The article proposes a source-independence test, confidential identity and competing-interest verification where public anonymity is protected, cross-role disclosure, recusal, provenance and status labels, correction propagation, a meaningful right of

reply, and independent appeal. Its governing principle is symmetrical accountability proportionate to reach, resources, data centrality, and capacity to affect identifiable researchers.

1. Introduction

Post-publication commentary has become a consequential layer of research governance because conventional peer review is selective rather than a comprehensive audit of data, images, statistics, authorship, competing interests, plagiarism, or possible misconduct [1]. Concerns now travel through journal correspondence, institutional channels, blogs, collaborative projects, journalism sites, and article-linked platforms [2–6]. Public availability can alert readers to genuine problems, but visibility does not itself verify a claim or confer authority to adjudicate misconduct.

The field has moved beyond isolated commentary. Retraction Watch is published by the Center for Scientific Integrity (CSI); Crossref distributes Retraction Watch Database records; PubPeer combines public comments with alerts, browser tools, and journal- or institution-facing dashboards; and conferences, funded programmes, and awards create additional channels for money, recognition, professional opportunity, and agenda formation [5–17]. These are documented connections among distinguishable actors, not proof of a centrally directed organisation.

The phrase *hidden in plain sight* identifies a governance paradox. Many relationships are publicly discoverable, yet they are dispersed across board pages, grant announcements, biographies, conference programmes, contributor lists, platform policies, technical documentation, award records, and nonprofit disclosures. Because no single record assembles them, the ecosystem can exercise integrated influence while remaining difficult to audit as an integrated system. A network need not possess a secret centre to generate concentrated effects.

The central analytical problem is networked authority. A preliminary concern may be repeated by connected contributors, websites, conferences, databases, alerts, or dashboards and thereby acquire visibility and institutional salience without gaining independent evidentiary support. If downstream actors do not identify the originating source, disclose contributor overlap, and state what they independently verified, repetition can be misread as corroboration. This difference is decisive because reputational and institutional consequences may accumulate while evidentiary certainty does not.

Existing debate often evaluates one comment, website, or organisation at a time. That perspective can miss the cumulative significance of role accumulation, funding, professionalisation, cross-publication, recognition, moderation discretion, and technical integration. This article addresses that gap through five questions, while refusing to infer private motive from public association. The inquiry asks:

RQ1. Which actors receive material, professional, reputational, infrastructural, or policy-related advantages from the professionalisation of post-publication scrutiny?

RQ2. Which organisational, financial, personnel, conference, award, contributor, and data-infrastructure relationships are publicly documented?

RQ3. When does repetition across connected actors represent independent verification, and when does it amplify a common source?

RQ4. What conflicts, information asymmetries, and due-process risks arise when public commentary becomes embedded in institutional and scholarly systems?

RQ5. Which disclosure, recusal, correction, appeal, and external-review standards should apply at different levels of reach and influence?

The article contributes a three-part framework combining comparative institutional analysis, qualitative relationship mapping, and conceptual incentive analysis. Its proposition is deliberately demanding but limited: no public critic, platform, journalist, nonprofit, database, funder, conference, or publisher team should acquire practical authority greater than the quality of its evidence, the independence of its verification, and the strength of its procedural safeguards. An ecosystem that audits science cannot claim exemption from proportionate, independent audit of its own decisions and interests.

2. Methods and evidentiary framework

2.1 Scope of the inquiry

The study examines publicly identifiable individuals, groups, platforms, organisations, publications, programmes, and services that identify, interpret, disseminate, aggregate, fund, recognise, moderate, or operationalise concerns about published research. *Watchdog actor* is used functionally rather than honorifically and does not imply equivalent purpose, expertise, reach, reliability, or authority. The purposive sample comprises the actors compared in Table 2 and adjacent organisational or infrastructural nodes required to document relevant funding, governance, recognition, dissemination, or data relationships. Inclusion required sustained post-publication activity, a public archive or service, participation in dissemination or assessment, or a documented relationship relevant to professionalisation, moderation, institutional use, funding, or recognition. Routine journal correspondence, isolated social-media posts, unsupported private allegations, and mere co-attendance or thematic similarity were excluded as independent nodes. The unit of analysis is the documented actor, role, relationship, resource flow, or technical integration—not the validity of every criticism associated with that actor. The sample is bounded rather than statistically representative, and the study makes no frequency claim about the wider global population of post-publication initiatives.

2.2 Meaning of "network"

Network denotes a set of typed, publicly documented connections: organisational affiliation; employment or governance; funding and awards; conference participation; contributor or cross-posting relationships; database acquisition or distribution; and dashboards, application programming interfaces, alerts, or institutional services. Each connection is coded according to what its source proves, so affiliation is not conflated with funding, funding with control, participation with governance, or public linking with collaboration. No connection is treated as proof of coordination, endorsement, bias, misconduct, or private motive. Recurrence may reflect genuine expertise,

visibility, shared subject matter, or the small size of a specialised field. It becomes governance-relevant when the same actors or organisations recur across concern identification, amplification, moderation, funding, recognition, data integration, or institutional response, because role accumulation can create concentrated effects even without a concerted plan. *Hidden* therefore refers to fragmented and uneven cross-disclosure, not clandestine organisation. The analysis is qualitative: it maps only documented edges, does not calculate centrality, and does not infer private communication, causation, or a controlling centre. This restraint does not make the network analytically trivial; it prevents the article from using the accusatory method it subjects to criticism.

2.3 Evidence base

The corpus consists principally of first-party, official, statutory, contractual, and technical materials publicly accessible through 28 August 2026: governance and financial pages, nonprofit filings, platform policies, grant and award announcements, conference programmes, government materials, contributor profiles, database agreements, repositories, and API documentation. First-party materials establish how an actor describes its structure, funding, services, or procedures; they do not independently prove that disclosure is complete or that a stated procedure is consistently applied. Consequential claims concerning status, amounts, contractual terms, governance roles, and institutional relationships were corroborated where practicable through filings, agreements, reciprocal announcements, or contemporaneous official documentation. Selected journalism and scholarship supply context where primary documentation is unavailable [18–19]. They are not substituted for statutory, contractual, or technical records when those records exist. Because webpages are mutable, the references record the responsible actor, title, date where available, URL, and retrieval date.

2.4 Source hierarchy and claim-specific citation

Sources were ranked by claim-specific fitness: statutory and official records; first-party programme, grant, award, conference, partnership, and infrastructure records; platform policies and interfaces; named organisational or personal pages; and independent journalism or scholarship used mainly for context. Rank does not imply neutrality or completeness. Every citation is limited to the proposition it can establish. A programme can document a role but not payment unless payment is separately recorded; a donation page can show solicitation but not the amount received; a database announcement can document acquisition and integration but not improper motive; and co-appearance can document overlap but not coordination. Tables 1–3 and Figure 1 apply the same rule at the level of each factual entry and relationship.

2.5 Treatment of absent or incomplete disclosure

When relevant information concerning funding, governance, monetisation, access, or professional relationships was not located, the article states that no relevant information was identified in the public materials reviewed. That formulation does not mean that no relationship exists. Public silence can reflect informality, incomplete pages, archival loss, limited administrative capacity, or non-public arrangements that the available record cannot distinguish. A donation button shows a support mechanism but not income; its absence does not prove unpaid work. Pseudonymity does not prove bad faith, and named authorship does not ensure institutional accountability. Non-disclosure is therefore analysed as a limit on auditability, not converted into evidence of concealment. The

consequence of incomplete disclosure is proportional. It becomes more serious as funding, audience persistence, moderation authority, institutional integration, data centrality, or capacity to affect identifiable researchers increases. This standard does not impose the reporting burden of a funded platform on an occasional blogger, but it does deny influential actors an accountability exemption based on informal origins or public-interest branding.

2.5.1 Historical transparency and archival limits

A current governance page cannot establish what was disclosed historically. Archived policies, staff lists, donor pages, moderation rules, correction practices, and service descriptions can support longitudinal comparison, but archival gaps may reflect technical exclusion, redesign, incomplete capture, or loss. They are treated as limits on auditability rather than proof of deliberate concealment.

2.6 Actor classification and comparative matrix

To prevent the methods from duplicating the findings, the actor taxonomy appears once in Table 2. Hybrid actors are classified by documented functions rather than forced into a single institutional category; the matrix distinguishes personal and pseudonymous commentary, collaborative or platform models, nonprofit and journalistic infrastructure, governmental oversight, conferences and awards, scholarly infrastructure, counter-scrutiny, and publisher integrity teams.

2.7 Definition of material, professional, and institutional advantage

Advantage means a documented or plausibly inferred resource, opportunity, capacity, reputational gain, or agenda-setting position, not an improper motive. The analysis distinguishes public or epistemic, financial, professional or reputational, institutional or infrastructural, and policy advantages, and attributes each only at the evidentiary level supported by the record.

2.8 Analytical framework

Three complementary approaches are used.

2.8.1 Comparative institutional analysis

Actors are compared by operator identity, legal or organisational status, governance disclosure, funding and revenue, moderation, technical functions, correction mechanisms, and institutional integration. Table 2 presents the descriptive comparison without implying equivalence among actors placed in the same category.

2.8.2 Qualitative relationship analysis

Figure 1 and Table 3 map only publicly documented organisational, financial, leadership, programme, conference, recognition, data-infrastructure, contributor, and linking relationships. The analysis asks where functions and resources accumulate and how signals travel; it does not infer unrecorded edges, calculate culpability, or treat network position as misconduct.

2.8.3 Conceptual incentive analysis

The conceptual models examine how attention, funding, institutional delay, professional opportunity, legal exposure, and correction costs could interact. They organise testable governance questions and do not estimate actual preferences, payoffs, strategy, or motive.

2.9 Distinguishing evidence from inference

Claims are classified as documented fact, analytical inference, or unverified hypothesis. A documented fact is supported by a source capable of proving the stated relationship; an inference explains the governance significance of documented facts; and a hypothesis identifies a question requiring further evidence. Language and conclusions are limited accordingly. The source-independence test asks whether later coverage identifies its originating source, documents genuinely independent verification, discloses material contributor overlap, and distinguishes allegation from authorised adjudication. Without those conditions, multiple appearances are counted as one information pathway rather than independent confirmations.

2.10 Limitations

The study is limited to public information and excludes confidential contracts, private correspondence, unpublished moderation records, non-public donor conditions, dashboard agreements, access logs, legal files, and institutional investigations. Official pages may be promotional, incomplete, outdated, or mutable, while filings may lag behind current activity. The English-language purposive sample is not a comprehensive global map. The study does not adjudicate the scientific merits of individual comments or decide whether a particular moderation, journal, or institutional action was justified. Its qualitative network map cannot establish private communication, causation, or coordination, and its incentive models are conceptual rather than empirically estimated. Anonymous-source independence is especially difficult to audit. PubPeer states that it cannot identify anonymous commenters and that readers cannot assess their motives or conflicts; its FAQ also describes account-level moderation through whitelisting and greylisting [6]. These design choices may protect vulnerable critics, but they prevent the public from testing whether apparently separate comments are independent or whether material interests recur behind multiple identities. Where public identity cannot safely be disclosed, confidential identity and competing-interest verification, auditable moderation, and independent appeal become more—not less—important. The article is therefore a structured analysis of observable governance, incentives, resource flows, and relationships. It is not a forensic determination of intention, liability, wrongdoing, or the truth of every contested allegation. Its critical force depends on the same evidentiary discipline it demands from the actors examined.

3. Historical institutionalisation and structural change

3.1 Timeline of selected public milestones

Table 1 summarises selected milestones showing the incremental development of post-publication scrutiny from dispersed commentary towards formal organisations, funded programmes, recognition systems, and scholarly-data infrastructure. Inclusion records the documented event; it does not imply central control or coordinated purpose.

Date	Public milestone	Structural relevance
31 December 2007	The earliest archived post identified on Copy, Shake, and Paste, “Write-only publications”, is published [2].	Establishes an early blog-based node concerned with plagiarism, publishing practices, and scientific misconduct. The site identifies Debora Weber-Wulff as its author.
3 August 2010	Retraction Watch publishes its launch article, “Why write a blog about retractions?” [3].	Marks the launch of a specialist journalistic project examining retractions as a window into scientific publishing and self-correction.
2011	VroniPlag publicly describes itself as a collaborative scientific plagiarism-documentation project without political or commercial interests and states that it is not affiliated with the VRONIPLAG trademark registered in June 2011 [4].	Provides an early public declaration of project identity, independence, and non-commercial positioning. The exact date on which this statement was first added to the wiki should not be inferred solely from the trademark-registration date.
2014	CSI reports receiving its first major grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation [7].	Marks the growing institutionalisation of watchdog journalism through nonprofit and philanthropic support. CSI states that the grant supported its work and enabled development of what became the Retraction Watch Database.
2015–2017	CSI states that additional major grants were received from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation and the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Trust [7,9].	Documents earlier philanthropic support beyond the 2014 MacArthur grant. CSI states that these grants lasted two years or less; public summaries do not provide all project-level conditions or decision rights.
24 May 2019	Elisabeth Bik launches Science Integrity Digest [20].	Establishes a prominent public-facing site focused on image integrity, questionable research practices, and independent research-integrity analysis. It later became associated with consultancy, crowdfunding, awards, and CSI-supported initiatives.
2022	CSI identifies WoodNext as a funder of Retraction Watch from 2022 onwards [7,9].	Demonstrates continuing philanthropic support for an established watchdog-journalism project.
12 September 2023	Crossref announces its acquisition and public distribution of the Retraction Watch Database [10–11].	Moves watchdog-generated retraction information into shared scholarly-data infrastructure. The agreement provides for Retraction Watch to continue populating the data and discloses an initial US\$175,000 acquisition fee and annual payments beginning at US\$120,000, increasing by 5% each year during the initial five-year term.
November 2024	The Einstein Foundation names Elisabeth Bik as its 2024 individual award recipient and PubPeer as its 2024 institutional award recipient [13–14].	Converts research-integrity activity into formal recognition and financial capacity. The Foundation states that Bik and the PubPeer Foundation each received €200,000, with PubPeer’s award intended to support further platform development.
January 2025	CSI states that its Sleuth in Residence Program was established through a donation from physician-scientist George Tidmarsh [7–9].	Creates a documented funding pathway for secure, paid, time-limited positions for research-integrity sleuths working with Retraction Watch’s research and journalism teams.
Early 2025	CSI launches the Elisabeth Bik Science Integrity Fund using proceeds from Bik’s 2024 Einstein Award [7,9].	Demonstrates how an individual award can be converted into continuing organisational and collaborative capacity. CSI states that the fund may support Bik, other sleuths and collaborators, training, grants, awards, education, and outreach.
4 June 2025	CSI announces a US\$900,000 Open Philanthropy grant for the Medical Evidence Project [17,21].	Marks an expansion into grant-funded forensic metascience directed towards medical literature with potential implications for human health. The funding is described as US\$450,000 annually for two years.
16–18 November 2025	IRIC 2025 includes Elisabeth Bik, James Heathers, Ivan Oransky, David Vaux, Jennifer Byrne, and other research-integrity actors in organising, chairing, workshop, and speaking roles [15–16,22].	Illustrates conference-based professional visibility, networking, knowledge exchange, and agenda formation across actors occupying different organisational roles. IRIC publicly identifies Simon Gandevia, David Vaux, and Jennifer Byrne as members of its organising group.
26 February 2026	CSI announces the Retraction Watch Research Accountability Reporting Fellowship with The Open Notebook [23].	Extends the organisation into funding, training, mentoring, and preliminary editing for local journalism concerning research accountability.
10 March 2026	CSI announces the Ctrl-Z Award [24].	Extends the organisation’s activities into formal recognition of researchers who identify substantial errors in their own published work and take steps to correct the record. The award introduces an additional mechanism for norm-setting, selection, and professional recognition.

Table 1. Selected milestones in the development and institutionalisation of the post-publication peer-review and research-integrity watchdog ecosystem

The chronology suggests three overlapping phases: an informal commentary phase; an organisational phase involving nonprofit structures, grants, platforms, and databases; and an infrastructural-professional phase involving service agreements, paid roles, institution-facing tools, conferences, awards, and journalism fellowships. The phases are descriptive and do not imply that later organisations acquired formal authority to adjudicate science.

These phases are heuristic rather than sharply bounded. Later organisational and infrastructural developments did not replace personal blogs, volunteer activity, anonymous commentary, or independent investigation. Such contributions remain important sources of concern identification and specialist scrutiny. At the same time, formal organisations increasingly provide resources, employment, data preservation, legal and administrative capacity, and channels through which independently generated concerns can acquire wider institutional reach. Within the selected sample, 2023–2026 marks an infrastructural inflection: database acquisition and public distribution, funded forensic programmes, paid positions, platform-development awards, and new award and fellowship initiatives increased organisational capacity and downstream reach [10–11,14,17,23–24].

3.2 Analytical significance of the timeline

The progression in Table 1 is not inherently legitimate or harmful. Funding can support continuity, technical capacity, evidence preservation, and legal resilience while also creating disclosure, selection, performance, and independence obligations. The Medical Evidence Project, for example, was announced with funding for a director, part-time analysts, and editorial support, while the Crossref agreement provides continuing payments for maintenance of the Retraction Watch Database [10–11,17,21]. These arrangements expand organisational capacity. They also make project selection, output metrics, editorial separation, contract terms, and correction performance legitimate subjects of external audit.

Institutionalisation nevertheless changes the nature of the governance problem. An occasional personal blog principally exercises authority through its own publications and audience. By contrast, a nonprofit organisation or platform connected to grants, service-fee arrangements, institutional dashboards, paid programmes, data infrastructure, professional appointments, or formal awards may influence a broader range of editorial, institutional, and reputational processes. Its responsibilities therefore extend beyond the accuracy of a single article or comment.

The transition from commentary to infrastructure is particularly significant. Once a public concern, retraction record, or platform signal enters a database, application programming interface, institutional dashboard, publisher workflow, or other downstream system, its visibility and practical consequences may extend beyond the original context. Crossref explicitly described the Retraction Watch agreement as a means of creating a large open resource for downstream services and the research community, while maintaining separation between the database arrangement and Retraction Watch's journalistic work. Infrastructural reach can amplify both accurate and inaccurate information. Well-classified and current records may alert users to publication-status changes. Incomplete classifications, delayed updates, unresolved disputes, or inadequate correction propagation may affect multiple services and audiences. Governance must therefore address provenance, classification, updating, downstream redistribution, author responses, correction visibility, and appeal.

Conference participation and awards create a related form of soft governance. They select speakers, judges, recipients, methods, and topics, thereby distributing visibility, money, and professional authority. This is an agenda-setting effect, not evidence of improper control. It nevertheless requires disclosure of organisers, selection criteria, judging roles, financial support, travel and accommodation, recusals, and relevant professional overlaps.

The historical analysis therefore supports the article's central proportionality argument: governance obligations should increase with organisational scale, financial support, moderation authority, data centrality, institutional integration, and potential reputational effect. A transition from informal commentary towards durable organisations and infrastructure should be accompanied by a corresponding transition from reliance on personal trust towards documented procedures, transparent conflicts management, visible correction, meaningful rights of reply, and independent audit.

4. Comparative map of post-publication watchdog actors

Post-publication scrutiny spans article-linked platforms, journalism, personal and pseudonymous blogs, lists, collaborative projects, nonprofits, governmental oversight, and scholarly infrastructure. Table 2 compares governance-relevant characteristics rather than treating stated missions as evidence of authority: operator identity, funding, accountability signals, technical affordances, persistence, and institutional reach. These actors are not epistemically or institutionally equivalent. Their accountability burden should increase with audience persistence, financial support, moderation discretion, technical integration, and the capacity to affect identifiable researchers.

4.1 Comparative governance, funding, disclosure, and platform affordances

The principal organisational, governance, funding, and technical characteristics of the selected actors are compared in Table 2.

Entity	Public operator or status	Public governance or accountability signal	Public funding or revenue signal	Principal affordance	Analytical assessment
Beall's List	Archived or list-style website; current maintenance is not transparently attributed in the reviewed materials	Minimal visible governance or appeals information	No public funding information identified on the sampled page	List of potentially predatory journals and publishers	Potentially high classification influence combined with limited visible governance transparency [25]
Copy, Shake, and Paste	Personal blog by Debora Weber-Wulff	Named authorship and publicly visible archive	No public funding disclosure identified in the reviewed materials	Blog commentary, archived posts, and reader comments	Early individual-led research-integrity and plagiarism commentary [2,26]
Fernig Lab Blog	Personal blog associated with Dave Fernig	Named personal authorship	No public funding disclosure identified in the reviewed materials	General scientific blog platform	Only partly functions as a research-integrity watchdog; influence is primarily personal and discursive [27]
Flaky Academic Journals	Personal blog associated with D. H. Kaye	Named authorship and public profile	No public funding disclosure identified in the reviewed materials	Blog posts, labels, archive, and comments	Illustrates a watchdog-by-blog model centred on individual commentary [28]
For Better Science	Website operated by Leonid Schneider, with guest contributors	Named authorship and contact information; public commenting and contribution structures	PayPal, Patreon, and reader-support mechanisms are publicly solicited	Investigative articles, guest contributions, reader discussion, and cross-posting	Hybrid of investigative journalism, activism, commentary, and audience-supported publication [29-30]
James Heathers and related forensic-meta activity	Personal writing; served as director of the CSI-hosted Medical Evidence Project for its first year	Named authorship and publicly described project affiliation	The Medical Evidence Project is supported through CSI and Open Philanthropy; separate personal-publication activity also exists	Essays, forensic-metascience analysis, books, public commentary, and project outputs	Shows a documented transition from individual forensic-metascience commentary to a time-limited leadership role in a funded project [17,21,31]
Neuroskeptic	Pseudonymous science-blogging identity operating through external publishing platforms	Pseudonymous authorship; limited public organisational governance	No public funding disclosure identified in the materials reviewed for this article	Science commentary and public discussion	Demonstrates how a pseudonymous individual voice can acquire substantial public influence despite limited formal governance visibility [32]
Nick Brown's blog	Personal Blogger website	Named personal authorship	No public funding disclosure identified in the reviewed materials	Detailed blog analyses and reader comments	Independent specialist commentary focused on apparent methodological and integrity problems [33]
ORI Updates	Public communication channel of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Research Integrity	Formal governmental oversight, published rules, guidance, and submission procedures	Publicly funded federal office	Official updates, regulatory guidance, educational material, and secure reporting mechanisms	State oversight node rather than an independent watchdog organisation [34-36]
PSLAB	Laboratory website associated with Paul S. Brookes	Named academic authorship and institutional disclaimers	No separate funding model disclosed for watchdog-related posts	Laboratory website containing "Science-Fraud?" and related commentary	Academic laboratory site that intermittently performs a watchdog or public-commentary function [37]
PubPeer	Website operated by the PubPeer Foundation	Public FAQs, moderation statements, terms, anonymity rules, copyright statements, and author-response mechanisms	Donations, public support, an Einstein Foundation institutional award, and journal- and institution-facing services	Anonymous or pseudonymous article-linked comments, author alerts, extensions, and dashboards	Persistent and institution-facing comment system whose moderation, access, correction, conflict, and appeal arrangements require independent scrutiny [5-6,12,14]
Retraction Watch	Journalism website and database-producing project of the Center for Scientific Integrity	Named staff and leadership; board, support, financial-information, and tax-filing materials are publicly available	Grants, donations, speaker honoraria, freelance income, library support, and service fees connected to the Retraction Watch Database	Reporting on retractions and related publishing events; database curation; associated fellowships and projects	Comparatively formalised organisation with multiple linked projects, funding streams, and infrastructure relationships; accountability should match this role accumulation [7,9,23,38]
Riddled	Pseudonymous Blogger website associated publicly with Smut Clyde	Pseudonymous authorship visible through posts and contribution records	No direct public funding disclosure identified on the sampled blog pages	Technical posts concerning papers, images, and paper-mill patterns	Pseudonymous specialist commentary with documented contributor and cross-posting overlap with For Better Science [30,39]
Predatoryjournals.org	Website describing itself as an anonymous volunteer organisation	About page states that contributors remain anonymous because of litigation concerns; named responsibility and external review were not identified	States that access is free, advertising is not displayed, and operating costs are paid by the volunteers without company support	Journal and publisher information intended to help authors assess questionable or predatory practices	Consequential classification by anonymous volunteers creates a need for transparent criteria, evidence, correction, and appeal even where the work is self-funded [40]
VroniPlag	Collaborative wiki hosted on the Fandom platform	Publicly states that it is a scientific project without political or commercial interests	No direct funding model identified on the sampled page	Collaborative documentation of plagiarism in academic texts	Community-based scrutiny supported by collective documentation and an explicit public claim of independence [4]
Science Integrity Digest	Website associated with Elisabeth Bik and Harbers-Bik LLC	Named authorship, About page, FAQ, guides, and blogroll	Patreon support is publicly solicited; the operator also works publicly as an independent consultant	Image-integrity analysis, educational guides, reporting posts, and links to other integrity actors	Individual consultant and commentator identity connected to a wider professional and institutional ecosystem [20,41]
ScienceGuardians	Website describing itself as a verified journal club; named operators were not identified on the reviewed About page	Publishes statements concerning verification, an operational team, conflicts, funding, and independence; external audit and named responsibility were not identified	States that it is supported by donations from senior scientists, legal advisers, and ethics or integrity experts; donor identities and amounts were not identified	Verified membership claims, anonymous participation for verified users, discussion, and guidance documents	Emergent counter-scrutiny website whose verification, security, funding, moderation, and independence claims require the same external scrutiny applied to other platforms [42]

Table 2. Comparative characteristics of selected post-publication peer-review and research-integrity actors. Source note: The table is based primarily on official homepages, About pages, FAQs, platform interfaces, project pages, support pages, and publicly linked organisational materials. The statement that no funding information was identified means only that such information was not found in the reviewed public sources; it does not establish that an actor receives no direct or indirect support

4.2 A structural gradient of institutionalisation

Table 2 reveals a gradient from individually authored or pseudonymous commentary to collaborative lists, funded projects, major platforms, nonprofit organisations, governmental offices, and shared infrastructure. The categories are not a ranking of merit. They show that persistence, moderation

authority, paid capacity, organisational continuity, and technical integration vary substantially even when actors use the common language of research integrity. The decisive distinction is between claimed mission and exercisable power. A personal publication may shape reputation through audience and searchability; a platform can attach durable commentary to article records; a nonprofit can combine fundraising, employment, journalism, programmes, awards, and database work; and an infrastructure provider can redistribute a status signal at scale. None obtains regulatory authority merely through growth, but each acquires a stronger burden to make responsibility, interests, evidence, correction, and review visible.

4.3 Affordances as sources of power

Technical affordances are governance choices. Searchability, anonymity, article linkage, notifications, persistent archives, dashboards, APIs, and data reuse determine how far a claim travels, how long it remains salient, and whether institutions encounter it outside its original context. These functions can make useful warnings easier to find, but they can also preserve error and detach preliminary commentary from its evidentiary status. Organisational breadth produces a parallel form of power. The capacity to fund projects, commission reporting, employ specialists, select speakers, distribute awards, curate databases, and form institutional partnerships can convert visibility into durable authority. That authority must be justified through auditable procedures rather than inferred from reputation, mission, or repeated citation.

4.4 Influence should determine governance burden

The accountability burden should rise with the persistence and scale of the audience, identifiability of criticised people, financial resources, paid staff and programmes, moderation discretion, access to confidential material, integration with journals or institutions, and capacity to affect investigations or formal decisions. At every level, the relevant question is whether correction, response, conflict management, and appeal are commensurate with foreseeable consequences. This proportional principle rejects both blanket dismissal of informal criticism and automatic legitimacy for professionalised actors. A small site is not disqualified merely because it lacks a board; a funded platform is not validated merely because it has one. Governance must be evaluated by the authority actually exercised and the safeguards actually available.

4.5 Epistemic status and institutional equivalence

A blog post, PubPeer comment, journalistic report, database entry, collaborative analysis, journal notice, governmental finding, and institutional investigation occupy different evidentiary and procedural positions. Movement between systems can enlarge practical influence without increasing epistemic certainty. A moderated comment remains a moderated comment when displayed in a dashboard; a repeated allegation remains derivative unless it has been independently tested. Readers must therefore be able to identify who produced a claim or who verified that person confidentially, what evidence supports it, what moderation or independent assessment occurred, whether the affected author responded, what formal outcome followed, and which material relationships bear on interpretation. When those questions cannot be answered, institutional users should not treat persistence, repetition, or technical integration as a substitute for proof.

5. Network overlaps, resource flows, and governance

The relationships identified here are organisational, financial, professional, dissemination-based, and infrastructural. They arise through project ownership, boards, grants, donations, service agreements, awards, conferences, recurring contributors, public links, and data integration. Many are ordinary in a small specialist field. Their cumulative significance is that criticism, money, professional recognition, moderation, data, and institutional attention can circulate through overlapping actors while responsibility remains divided among them. A connection proves only the relationship its source records. It does not prove control, collusion, bias, or influence over a specific outcome. Yet it is equally mistaken to treat each connection as irrelevant merely because none proves a conspiracy. Governance analysis concerns the combined capacity created by documented relationships and whether disclosure and independent review match that capacity.

5.1 The Center for Scientific Integrity as an organisational hub

Table 3 identifies CSI as an organisational hub because reporting, database stewardship, fellowships, forensic programmes, awards, and related initiatives are housed in or administered through the same legal organisation [7–9,17,21,23–24,43–44]. This does not establish control over independent critics, publishers, or institutions. It establishes functional concentration, which makes project-level responsibility, cross-role conflicts, recusals, performance reporting, and independent review legitimate requirements rather than optional gestures. The governance significance lies in functional concentration. When publication, fundraising, programme administration, data stewardship, professional recognition, and external partnerships coexist within one organisation, readers require clear responsibility lines, project-level conflicts, recusal rules, and independent review of contested decisions.

5.2 Conference governance and professional convergence

IRIC exercises soft governance by selecting organisers, chairs, speakers, subjects, and forms of recognised expertise. Its 2025 materials identify Simon Gandevia, David Vaux, and Jennifer Byrne as organisers and document roles for James Heathers, Ivan Oransky, Elisabeth Bik, David Vaux, Jennifer Byrne, Ginny Barbour, and others [15–16,22]. The overlap between conference participation and nonprofit boards, funded projects, public commentary, and organisational leadership may reflect expertise and the limited size of the field. It also concentrates agenda-setting opportunity. Programmes should therefore cross-disclose relevant board roles, grants, consultancy, donor relationships, platform affiliations, award functions, and material travel or speaking support, so an audience can see how professional authority is assembled.

5.3 Awards as financial and reputational capital

The Einstein Foundation identified Elisabeth Bik and PubPeer as 2024 recipients and states that each received €200,000, with PubPeer's award supporting platform development [13–14]. The Foundation publishes its jury, general criteria, and a process involving panel shortlisting and Executive Board review, while stating that decisions are final and not appealable [45–46]. The public pages reviewed do not provide candidate-specific evaluation reports, scoring records, or case-specific conflict declarations. That absence does not prove favouritism. It means that a substantial financial and reputational decision cannot be reconstructed independently from the public record,

even though the award can expand the recipient's authority, visibility, donor attractiveness, and future organisational capacity. CSI later announced that proceeds from Bik's award established the Elisabeth Bik Science Integrity Fund [9]. PubPeer's award likewise supplied development capital. These sequences show a reinforcement mechanism in which visibility can generate recognition, recognition can generate money, and money can enlarge the capacity to produce or distribute further integrity signals. The mechanism may support valuable work, but it cannot be governed adequately through prestige alone; award conflicts, recusals, use of funds, and recipient involvement in later selections require visible rules.

5.4 Crossref and the conversion of watchdog data into infrastructure

Crossref's 2023 acquisition and public distribution of the Retraction Watch Database moved a privately curated integrity resource into shared scholarly infrastructure [10–11]. The signed arrangement disclosed an initial US\$175,000 payment and annual payments beginning at US\$120,000, increasing by 5% each year during an initial five-year term; Retraction Watch continues to populate the data. CSI describes related service-fee support [9–11]. Crossref is a member-governed 501(c)(6) organisation whose board sets strategic direction and includes representatives of several major publishers [47]. Publisher representation is a feature of its governance model and does not prove influence over this agreement. It does make decision records, conflicts, and recusals relevant when infrastructure incorporates integrity information about publisher members. The agreement converts watchdog-curated information into reusable third-party metadata. That can improve discovery of corrections and retractions, but it can also give a privately classified record an official appearance and reproduce errors or unresolved classifications across many services. Provenance, source separation, classification rules, update frequency, client access, dispute resolution, and correction propagation must therefore be auditable.

5.5 Philanthropic funding and project formation

Open Philanthropy, WoodNext, George Tidmarsh, and other donors occupy resource-allocation positions within the mapped ecosystem. Their documented support does not establish control over recipients. It does determine which projects can employ staff, maintain services, generate repeated outputs, and acquire institutional visibility [7–9,17,21]. Funding shapes salience even when it is entirely consistent with a donor's stated mission. Project-level disclosure should therefore identify the donor, amount or informative band, duration, purpose, reporting and output expectations, role in project design, decision rights, renewal conditions, and safeguards for publication or analytical independence. Broad acknowledgement alone may be insufficient where a funded activity can affect public controversy, clinical evidence, or institutional decisions.

5.6 Independent blogs, cross-posting, and amplification

Recurring contributors, cross-posting, curated links, and referrals create dissemination edges among outlets that may remain legally and editorially distinct [20,29–30,39,41,48]. Those edges can increase discoverability and repetition without proving coordination. The appropriate rule is source independence: later coverage should identify the originating source, describe what was independently checked, disclose material contributor overlap, and distinguish public allegation from journal or institutional adjudication. PubPeer's anonymity model makes actor independence especially difficult to test because the platform says that it cannot identify anonymous commenters

and readers cannot assess their motives or conflicts [6]. Protection from retaliation can justify public anonymity, but it cannot justify institutional opacity. If apparently separate comments may influence alerts, dashboards, journalism, or investigations, the platform should be capable of confidentially detecting duplicate identities and material conflicts, auditing moderator decisions, and supplying an independent appeal. Without those safeguards, multiple opaque signals must not be presented as multiple independent sources.

5.7 Entity-relationship map

The principal organisational, financial, professional, conference, recognition, infrastructure, and cross-publication relationships identified in the analysis are visualised in Figure 1. The map provides a consolidated representation of how resources, data, roles, visibility, and professional recognition circulate across the selected ecosystem. Each connection denotes only the specific publicly documented relationship indicated in the figure legend. Neither the presence of an edge nor the position of a node should be interpreted as evidence of control, coordinated intent, misconduct, or influence over a particular criticism, moderation decision, or institutional outcome.

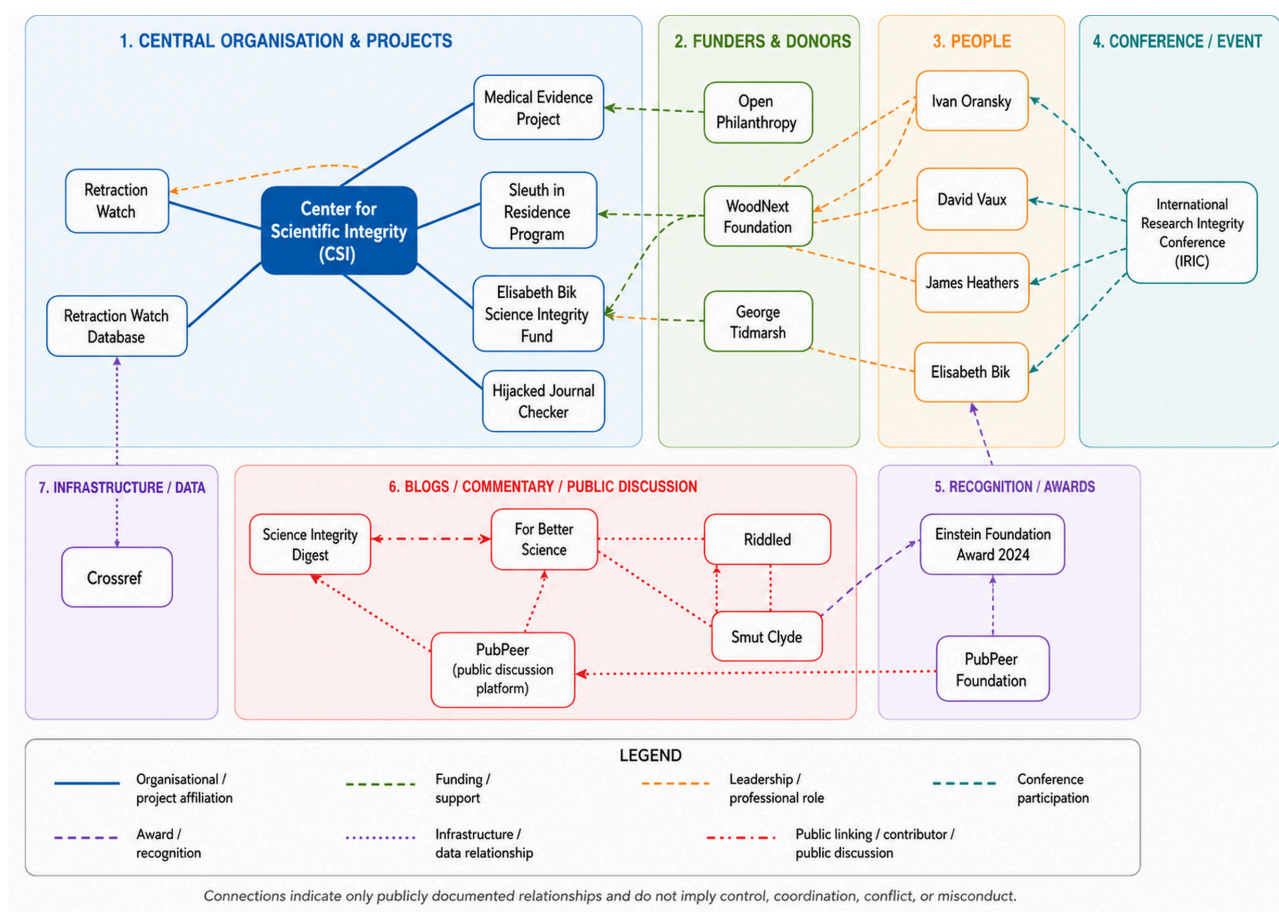


Figure 1. Publicly documented organisational, financial, professional, recognition, conference, data-infrastructure, and cross-publication relationships within the post-publication peer-review ecosystem. Connections indicate only the relationship described and do not establish control, coordinated intent, conflict, or misconduct. Source: Author's qualitative mapping of the publicly documented relationships and references presented in Table 3.

5.8 Network relationship table

The relationships visualised in Figure 1 are set out in source-controlled form in Table 3. The table distinguishes the publicly documented connection from its analytical significance. Organisational affiliation, funding, conference participation, awards, contributor relationships, and public linking may create legitimate governance questions, but none of these connections independently proves control, coordination, bias, misconduct, or influence over a particular editorial or institutional outcome.

Node A	Node B	Documented relationship	Analytical significance
Center for Scientific Integrity	Retraction Watch	Retraction Watch is a project of the Center for Scientific Integrity [7,9].	Watchdog journalism operates within a formal nonprofit governance structure.
Center for Scientific Integrity	Retraction Watch Database	The database forms part of CSI's project portfolio, while Retraction Watch continues its curation [7,9].	A significant research-integrity data asset is administered within the same nonprofit organisation as the associated journalistic project.
Crossref	Retraction Watch Database	Crossref acquired and publicly distributes the database, while Retraction Watch continues to update it under a continuing service arrangement [9-11].	Watchdog-generated information has become shared scholarly infrastructure supported through a formal financial and technical agreement.
Center for Scientific Integrity	Medical Evidence Project	The Medical Evidence Project is described as a CSI venture [8-9,17,21].	CSI's activities extend from journalism and database stewardship into active forensic-metascience work.
Open Philanthropy	Medical Evidence Project	Open Philanthropy provided a US\$900,000 grant over two years [17].	Philanthropic selection creates organisational capacity and directs resources towards the examination of medical literature.
Center for Scientific Integrity	Sleuth in Residence Program	The Sleuth in Residence Program is administered through CSI [8-9].	Research-integrity work historically associated with independent or voluntary activity is converted into paid and institutionally supported work.
George Tidmarsh	Sleuth in Residence Program	CSI states that a donation from George Tidmarsh enabled the programme's establishment [8-9].	Individual philanthropy contributes directly to the creation of professional research-integrity roles.
WoodNext	Retraction Watch and CSI	CSI identifies WoodNext as a funder of Retraction Watch from 2022 onwards [7,9].	Philanthropic support contributes to organisational continuity and journalistic capacity.
Center for Scientific Integrity	David Vaux	David Vaux is publicly listed as a CSI board member [7,9].	This establishes a nonprofit-governance role relevant to his separate conference activities.
International Research Integrity Conference	David Vaux	IRIC identifies Vaux as an organiser and documents chairing or speaking roles [15-16,22].	Conference governance and nonprofit-board participation converge in one individual.
International Research Integrity Conference	Ivan Oransky	IRIC documents invited participation by Oransky [16,22].	CSI and Retraction Watch leadership intersects with conference-based professional visibility.
International Research Integrity Conference	James Heathers	IRIC documents workshop and invited-speaking roles for Heathers [16,22].	Leadership of a funded CSI project intersects with conference participation and visibility.
Einstein Foundation Award	PubPeer Foundation	PubPeer received the 2024 institutional award and €200,000 in development funding [13-14].	Formal recognition is converted into additional platform-development capacity.
Einstein Foundation Award	Elisabeth Bik	Bik received the 2024 individual award of €200,000 [13].	Independent research-integrity activity generates formal prestige and financial resources.
Elisabeth Bik's award proceeds	Elisabeth Bik Science Integrity Fund and CSI	CSI states that the fund was launched using proceeds from Bik's award [9].	Individual award resources are converted into continuing organisational and collaborative capacity.
Elisabeth Bik	Science Integrity Digest	Bik is the named author and operator of the site [20,41].	A personal professional identity is directly connected to a prominent research-integrity publication.
Elisabeth Bik	International Research Integrity Conference	IRIC documents Bik's invited participation [16,22].	Public watchdog visibility intersects with conference recognition and agenda formation.
Riddled and Smut Clyde	For Better Science	For Better Science identifies Smut Clyde as a contributor and links to Riddled [29-30,39].	Material may circulate across independent sites through a recurring contributor relationship.
Science Integrity Digest	Selected research-integrity sites	The site maintains a curated blogroll linking to other actors in the ecosystem [41,48].	Selective public linking increases visibility and network discoverability but does not establish collaboration or endorsement.
Anna Abalkina	Retraction Watch Hijacked Journal Checker	CSI states that Abalkina created the checker in partnership with Retraction Watch [43].	The named specialist role is publicly documented; institutional affiliation does not by itself make her university responsible for the project.
James Heathers	Medical Evidence Project	The project states that Heathers served as director for its first year and identifies his Linnaeus University research affiliation [44].	A time-limited project role and a university affiliation are distinct relationships; the affiliation does not establish university governance of the CSI project.
Crossref governance	Publisher member representatives	Crossref states that its member-elected board governs the organisation; the current board includes several publisher representatives [47].	Publisher participation is part of Crossref governance, not evidence of influence over a specific acquisition. Integrity-data decisions nevertheless require visible conflict and recusal procedures.
Einstein Foundation Award jury	Award recipients and applicants	The award publishes a jury, selection criteria, and a process involving jury shortlisting and Executive Board review; decisions are final and not open to appeal [45-46].	General governance is public, but candidate-specific scoring and conflict records were not identified; substantial recognition therefore warrants stronger case-level transparency.

Table 3. Publicly documented relationships and their analytical significance

The table preserves the principal relationship set identified in the source material while separating factual documentation from interpretation. CSI emerges as a significant organisational hub, while

Crossref, philanthropic donors, IRIC, the Einstein Foundation Award, and independent blogs occupy distinct infrastructure, funding, recognition, conference, and dissemination positions.

5.9 Governance implications of overlapping roles

Across the ecosystem, actors may identify concerns, moderate publication, fund projects, report cases, select speakers or award recipients, distribute data, or advise institutions. The record does not establish that one actor performs every function in a single case. The governance problem is cumulative role overlap and the possibility that no one assumes responsibility for the effects produced across the full pathway. A consequential case should therefore be tested for source independence, actor independence, and adjudicative independence. Did later publications independently examine the evidence? Were recurring contributors and material relationships disclosed or confidentially verified? Was the formal outcome reached by an authorised journal or institution applying its own procedure? Until all three questions are answered, connected repetition should not be counted as corroboration. Recusal is appropriate when a decision concerns a collaborator, donor, employer, project partner, recurring contributor, professional competitor, consultancy client, or other materially connected party. Where full functional separation is impracticable, visible role differentiation and external review are minimum safeguards. A field cannot credibly demand disclosure from researchers while treating its own overlapping roles as too ordinary to disclose.

6. Conceptual Incentive Models: Analytical Questions, Not Empirical Findings

The documented relationships permit a limited conceptual analysis of incentives, but they do not establish private motives or actual utility calculations. The models below are heuristic questions about how attention, funding, institutional delay, professional opportunity, legal exposure, and correction costs may interact. They should not be read as evidence that any identified actor behaved strategically or improperly. Relevant actors include websites and bloggers, nonprofit organisations, analysts and consultants, funders, publishers, universities, conference organisers, infrastructure providers, and affected researchers. Their interests may align in some situations and conflict in others. The purpose of the models is to identify governance pressure points, not to assign motive. Because the models are not empirically estimated, only propositions directly supported by public documents are treated as findings. The models are retained in shortened form to organise future research and policy testing.

6.1 A mixed-motive system

Research-integrity activity may combine stated public-interest aims with organisational continuity, funding needs, audience attention, professional recognition, and legal risk. Coexistence of these interests is not evidence of bad faith. It creates a need to disclose secondary interests and to measure accuracy, correction, reversals, and procedural fairness rather than activity or visibility alone.

6.2 Principal-agent model

Organisations may respond to proxy measures such as traffic, comment volume, database growth, dashboard uptake, grants, awards, invitations, corrections, or retractions associated with their

activity. These measures may reward attention rather than accuracy. Impact reporting should therefore distinguish concerns raised, independently substantiated, rejected, corrected, narrowed, reversed, or unresolved. CSI's disclosures concerning grants, service fees, programmes, awards, paid placements, and honoraria show that research-integrity activity can generate continuing organisational outputs and professional roles [8–9,11,17,23–24]. This does not make the work valid or invalid. It makes transparent performance criteria necessary.

6.3 Public signals and verification

A PubPeer comment, blog post, Retraction Watch report, database record, or conference presentation is a public signal, not a finding. PubPeer's published rules call for facts, logic, and publicly verifiable information and prohibit direct allegations of misconduct [6]. Acceptance by a moderator, however, is not independent scientific adjudication, and institutional uptake cannot retroactively make it one.

6.4 Watchdog–institution repeated game

A central strategic interaction occurs between a watchdog and the journal, publisher, university, or research institution responsible for responding to a concern. The principal strategic options and their possible consequences are summarised in Table 4.

Watchdog strategy	Institution investigates promptly and transparently	Institution delays, minimises, or remains vague
Watchdog raises the concern privately first	Potentially the most favourable collective outcome. The institution receives an opportunity to clarify the evidence, examine records, contact authors, and correct the literature with reduced unnecessary reputational spillover. The watchdog may receive less public visibility or recognition.	The concern may become trapped within slow or opaque procedures. The institution gains time, while the watchdog receives little evidence that action is occurring and may later escalate publicly.
Watchdog raises the concern publicly first	Rapid correction remains possible and public accountability increases. However, reputational effects begin before full adjudication, while the watchdog gains greater visibility and signalling value.	A plausible repeated-game equilibrium where mutual trust is low. The watchdog gains public attention and pressure leverage; the institution avoids immediate concession but accumulates longer-term reputational costs; the controversy may escalate.

Table 4. Conceptual payoff matrix for watchdogs and institutions

Private notification followed by prompt, documented assessment may reduce unnecessary reputational spillover. It is not always feasible or trusted. Public-first strategies may become more likely where journals or institutions are perceived as slow or opaque. Table 4 therefore presents possibilities rather than a preferred universal sequence.

Where journals or institutions are perceived as slow, defensive, inconsistent, or unresponsive, public-first strategies become more attractive to watchdogs. Nick Brown has publicly described a preference for blogging about apparent problems after concluding that private routes did not always produce effective action [33]. PubPeer is structurally designed for public article-linked commenting and author notification [5–6], while Retraction Watch may subsequently disseminate selected cases to a wider audience [38]. The bottom-right cell of Table 4 should not be presented as a proven universal equilibrium. It is a plausible repeated-game outcome where mutual trust is low. Institutions may delay because immediate acknowledgement carries legal, staffing, financial, and reputational consequences. Watchdogs may publish because institutional delay reduces confidence in

confidential mechanisms. Individually rational strategies may therefore produce a collectively damaging cycle of escalation.

6.4.1 Asymmetric timing costs

The costs of delay are distributed unevenly. For institutions, additional time may permit retrieval of records, legal consultation, communication with authors, and evaluation of evidence. For the criticised researcher, however, delay may prolong reputational uncertainty. For the watchdog, institutional silence may create suspicion that the concern is being ignored. For readers and the wider public, delay may mean continued reliance on disputed findings. A stronger governance system should therefore establish acknowledgement deadlines, indicative investigation timelines, confidential evidence channels, interim status notices, safeguards against retaliation, and procedures for publishing final outcomes where legally and ethically permissible. It should also require prompt and visible correction of inaccurate public claims. These mechanisms would reduce the incentive for premature public escalation without suppressing legitimate whistleblowing.

6.5 Donor–watchdog principal–agent game

Funding creates a second strategic relationship. Donors provide capacity, while watchdog organisations provide investigations, projects, databases, public communication, or measurable outputs. The potential strategic combinations are summarised in Table 5.

Donor strategy	Watchdog accepts strong disclosure and governance conditions	Watchdog accepts funding with lighter public conditions
Donor funds with explicit transparency requirements	A possible separating equilibrium. The donor signals commitment to accountable reform, while the watchdog accepts limits on discretion but gains legitimacy through transparent conditions, deliverables, and independence safeguards.	Potentially unstable. Strong donor expectations combined with limited recipient disclosure may create inconsistency, misunderstanding, or incomplete public accountability.
Donor funds without strong public conditions	The watchdog gains capacity and voluntarily publishes meaningful governance information, but the public remains dependent on the organisation's own disclosure practices.	A possible pooling equilibrium. Useful work may be funded, but external observers cannot readily distinguish whether priorities reflect public need, donor preference, organisational convenience, or a combination of these factors.

Table 5. Conceptual payoff matrix for donors and watchdog organisations

CSI publicly identifies broad funding relationships and several funded projects, but the reviewed materials provide less information about detailed donor conditions, project-selection authority, performance metrics, publication independence, or decision rights [8–9,17]. The absence of detailed public conditions does not establish donor control or a concealed agenda. It means that external observers cannot fully assess how projects are selected, how performance is evaluated, or whether funders retain formal or informal influence. The most defensible inference is that funding shapes salience. Projects that receive resources can employ staff, maintain databases, organise programmes, participate in conferences, and generate sustained outputs. Projects without support may remain voluntary, intermittent, or less visible.

6.6 Two-sided platform model

PubPeer can be understood as a two-sided platform. Commenters receive article-linked visibility, persistence, notifications, and possible anonymity, while authors, readers, editors, universities,

publishers, and dashboard users receive searchable signals attached to publications. Growth on either side can reinforce the other, expanding reach without establishing the quality of any individual comment. The platform publishes evidentiary and tone rules and a response mechanism [6], but its public pages provide less systematic information about aggregate moderation, moderator expertise, independent appeal, institutional access terms, or confidential conflict checks. Those omissions become more consequential when comments move through dashboards or alerts [5,12]. A preliminary concern should remain visibly provisional wherever it travels, with author responses and later journal or institutional outcomes attached to the same record.

6.7 Philanthropic portfolio-allocation model

Philanthropic funders face a portfolio-allocation problem when deciding which research-integrity initiatives offer the greatest expected benefit relative to cost. Potential investment targets include databases, post-publication platforms, forensic-metascience projects, investigative journalism, training programmes, paid sleuthing positions, integrity-screening software, conferences, awards, and governance reform. Funders may favour initiatives that promise scale, measurable outputs, technical reuse, institutional adoption, public visibility, or policy relevance. Such selection may marginalise slower and less visible work, including confidential clarification, author assistance, institutional capacity building, or correction of unjustified allegations. A funding evaluation should therefore include accuracy, substantiation, correction, false-positive indicators, procedural fairness, downstream harm, geographical balance, and independence. The number of concerns generated or publicised is not a sufficient performance measure. The likely trajectory is continued coexistence of volunteer commentary, professional services, nonprofit programmes, data systems, conferences, awards, and philanthropic funding. Crossref distribution of Retraction Watch data, PubPeer dashboards, and CSI programmes already document parts of that professionalisation [5,10–12,17,23–24]. The principal risk is gradual alignment among attention, funding, professional opportunity, platform reach, and institutional dependence. That alignment need not be coordinated to influence which concerns become visible, which methods receive resources, and which actors are treated as authoritative. It should be tested empirically rather than denied merely because no conspiracy has been proved.

6.8 Governance implications of the models

The models direct attention to measurable outcomes: accuracy, substantiation, correction, response, reversal, non-substantiation, procedural fairness, and downstream updating. Traffic, output volume, grants, awards, or institutional uptake cannot serve as proxies for quality. Provenance, status labels, conflict disclosure, correction propagation, and independent review become indispensable when preliminary signals enter databases, dashboards, or formal processes.

7. Distribution of Material, Professional, and Institutional Advantages

The ecosystem distributes public benefits and private or institutional advantages simultaneously. Readers may gain earlier warning of possible problems; organisations may gain grants, service income, staff, data centrality, and legitimacy; individuals may gain consultancy, project roles, awards, speaking invitations, audience support, and professional authority; publishers and institutions may gain external detection capacity; and infrastructure providers may gain relevance

through reusable integrity data. Table 6 consolidates the documented mechanisms and governance implications.

7.1 Public benefit does not cancel secondary interest

A benefit to the scholarly record does not make secondary interests irrelevant. Nor does compensation, recognition, or organisational growth prove that a criticism was motivated by reward. The analytically defensible question is whether benefits depend on case visibility, allegation volume, platform growth, or institutional uptake, and whether comparable incentives exist for correction, restraint, confidential resolution, or publication of exonerating outcomes.

7.2 Professionalisation and the accountability asymmetry

Paid integrity work can preserve expertise, reduce precarity, and support sustained analysis. It can also convert informal influence into a career structure whose selection criteria, output expectations, conflicts, and performance measures are not visible to those affected. The issue is not whether critics may be paid. It is whether compensation and authority are governed by standards at least as demanding as those imposed on the researchers being scrutinised. A pronounced asymmetry arises when platforms or commentators can generate persistent reputational signals while the affected researcher bears the burden of disproving an allegation, locating every repetition, and securing corrections across multiple outlets. Funding and technical integration can enlarge this asymmetry unless response rights, status updates, and correction propagation grow at the same rate as dissemination.

7.3 Beneficiary matrix

Table 6 identifies the principal beneficiary groups, mechanisms of benefit, public evidence, and corresponding governance obligations.

Beneficiary group	Principal current benefits	Publicly documented mechanism	Governance implication
Researchers, readers, clinicians, and patients	Better access to concerns, corrections, and retraction information; earlier warning of potentially unreliable findings.	Public comments, investigative reporting, retraction metadata, and medical-literature analysis [6,10–11,14,17].	Signals should be accurate, contextualised, updated, and clearly distinguished from formal findings.
Nonprofit organisations	Grants, donations, programme capacity, staffing, service income, and institutional legitimacy.	CSI funding, support, project, and financial disclosures [7–9,17].	Annual financial, donor, project, governance, and competing-interest disclosures are appropriate.
Platform operators	Platform development, audience growth, data centrality, institutional use, and award funding.	PubPeer’s public services and Einstein Foundation award [5–6,12,14].	Transparent governance, moderation reporting, appeals, correction records, and access rules are required.
Individual sleuths and consultants	Consultancy, awards, paid roles, speaking opportunities, reader support, professional prestige, and authority.	Public profiles, funded projects, Patreon support, awards, and conference participation [13,16–17,20–21,41].	Financial, professional, organisational, and relational interests should be disclosed.
Journalists and specialist blogs	Reader support, visibility, authority, audience development, and contributor networks.	Donation mechanisms, Patreon, contributor relationships, public archives, and cross-publication [29–30,39].	Clear sourcing, visible corrections, meaningful rights of reply, and separation of allegation from adjudication are necessary.
Conference organisers and speakers	Prestige, convening authority, professional networking, and agenda-setting influence.	IRIC programmes and organising information [15–16,22].	Relevant grants, board roles, consultancy, organisational affiliations, and selection processes should be disclosed.
Award recipients and award bodies	Financial support, legitimacy, visibility, future opportunities, and norm-setting authority.	Einstein Foundation awards and the Ctrl-Z Award [13–14,24].	Eligibility, judging roles, conflicts, recusals, funding sources, and relationships with recipients should be transparent.
Publishers and institutions	External detection, reduced screening burden, integrity signals, reputational repair, and signalling value.	Databases, public comments, dashboards, alerts, and integrity partnerships [5–6,10–12].	Unadjudicated signals should not be treated as findings; internal expertise and due process must be retained.
Infrastructure providers	Metadata utility, application programming interface relevance, workflow centrality, partnerships, and institutional integration.	Crossref-Retraction Watch data integration [10–11].	Provenance, status labelling, update frequency, access conditions, correction propagation, and audit requirements should be disclosed.
Donors and foundations	Mission fulfilment, scalable reform, policy relevance, and association with integrity initiatives.	Philanthropic support for CSI programmes [8–9,17].	Grant conditions, project-selection authority, performance metrics, donor involvement, and independence safeguards should be disclosed.

Table 6. Current beneficiaries, benefit mechanisms, evidentiary basis, and governance implications

7.4 What advantage proves—and what it does not

The evidence does not establish that grants, donations, awards, conference roles, service agreements, or professional opportunities necessarily compromise the associated work, and it does not establish a covert coordinated organisation. It does establish that research-integrity activity can generate money, employment, organisational growth, data centrality, prestige, agenda-setting opportunity, and policy relevance. Those effects create actual, potential, or perceived conflicts that cannot be answered by insisting on public-interest purpose. The proper response is neither automatic endorsement nor blanket dismissal, but disclosure and independent accountability proportionate to the resources, authority, and consequences involved. Future research should examine who controls aggregation, classification, dashboards, pricing, access, and correction as integrity signals become more machine-readable and institutionally embedded.

8. Conflicts of Interest, Disclosure, and Transparency Indicators

Post-publication actors routinely demand disclosure from authors, journals, publishers, and institutions. The same principle must apply to those who select cases, frame allegations, moderate visibility, fund programmes, distribute awards, operate dashboards, or supply integrity data. A public-interest mission is not a conflict-management system. A conflict exists where a financial, organisational, professional, relational, reputational, or access-related interest could reasonably influence—or appear to influence—case selection, interpretation, moderation, amplification,

funding, recognition, or institutional use. Identification of a conflict is not a finding of corruption. It is a requirement to disclose, recuse, or obtain independent review before trust is demanded.

8.1 Interests requiring disclosure

Relevant financial interests include grants, donations, salaries, residencies, consultancy, speaking support, fellowships, awards, audience payments, service fees, and travel or hospitality. Organisational interests include grant renewal, platform growth, database expansion, programme survival, institutional clients, and demonstrable impact. Professional and relational interests include employment, project leadership, recurring contribution, boards, collaborations, conference roles, award judging, donor relationships, and competition. Access-related interests arise from control of moderation systems, dashboards, APIs, confidential submissions, private correspondence, or unpublished evidence. None of these interests automatically invalidates a decision. Their cumulative relevance depends on proximity to the case and the authority exercised. The critical test is whether a reasonable reader can identify the relationship, determine the role in which a person acted, and verify that any necessary recusal or independent assessment occurred.

8.2 Disclosure is necessary but sometimes insufficient

Disclosure permits interpretation; it does not cure a conflict where the same person remains responsible for a consequential decision involving a collaborator, donor, employer, client, project partner, recurring contributor, or professional competitor. In such cases, responsibility should pass to an independent decision-maker and the recusal should be recorded. The absence of proved bias is not a reason to omit a safeguard designed to prevent or expose bias. This standard avoids opposite errors. It does not treat every professional connection as corruption, and it does not allow a reputation for integrity to substitute for conflict management. Expertise can explain repeated appointments; it cannot make repeated appointments exempt from cross-disclosure.

8.3 Thresholds for enhanced transparency

Enhanced transparency is triggered when an actor receives substantial integrity-related funding, employs staff, moderates at scale, allocates awards or paid roles, handles confidential evidence, supplies institution-facing tools, or repeatedly sets conference and programme agendas. At that point, disclosure should cover amounts or informative bands, conditions, duration, decision rights, governance, moderation responsibility, client access, cross-affiliations, recusals, and independent appeals. The threshold follows power rather than organisational label. A nonprofit may be less transparent than a personal publication in one domain and more transparent in another. What matters is whether the public record makes the relevant decision pathway auditable before an adverse signal is treated as authoritative.

8.4 Proposed transparency framework

Table 7 converts this principle into minimum and enhanced indicators. It distinguishes the lower administrative burden appropriate to a small actor from the stronger obligations created by funding, moderation, data integration, and institutional reach.

Indicator	Minimum standard	Enhanced standard	Governance rationale
Identity	The public operator, author, or organisational steward is identified unless anonymity is necessary for safety.	Editorial, moderation, legal, technical, financial, and governance responsibilities are identified separately.	Distinguishes protected anonymous criticism from institutional judgement and decision-making.
Legal and organisational status	Basic ownership, registration, or institutional status is stated.	Governing documents, board composition, executive authority, and an organisational chart are published.	Enables readers to identify who holds formal responsibility.
Funding	Principal revenue categories are disclosed annually.	Donor names, amounts or funding bands, project earmarks, grant duration, service agreements, and material counterparties are reported.	Shows how organisational priorities may relate to specific funding streams.
Governance	Ownership and basic board information are available.	Editorial, moderation, legal, fundraising, award, and appeals functions are separated or independently reviewed.	Reduces unchecked concentration of decision-making authority.
Platform access	Public and restricted services are described.	Dashboard and API clients, eligibility requirements, charges, contractual conditions, and privileged data fields are disclosed.	Reveals whether institutions or commercial users receive enhanced or non-public access.
Moderation	General commenting and moderation rules are publicly available.	Annual moderation reports, rejection categories, amendment records, appeals procedures, and decision-review mechanisms are published.	Makes moderation empirically assessable and accountable.
Evidence handling	Accepted evidence types and basic submission rules are stated.	Provenance, verification, retention, confidentiality, data-protection, access, and destruction procedures are published.	Protects sensitive or non-public evidence and those affected by its use.
Relationships	Board and formal advisory roles are listed.	Annual cross-disclosure covers grants, consultancy, conference roles, awards, employment, donors, contributor relationships, and platform partnerships.	Makes cumulative role concentration and possible relational conflicts visible.
Right of reply	Affected authors or organisations can submit a response.	Notice procedures, response timelines, equal visibility, anti-retaliation safeguards, and response-status tracking are published.	Prevents criticism from becoming structurally one-sided.
Corrections and amendments	A visible mechanism exists for correcting factual errors.	Public version histories, amendment dates, correction reasons, and archived earlier versions are maintained.	Supports fairness, accountability, and historical traceability.
Appeals and external review	A complaint channel is available.	An independent appeals panel, external ombudsperson, or periodic third-party audit is established.	Provides review beyond the original moderator or publisher.
Impact claims	General mission and activity descriptions are published.	Metrics include substantiation rates, reversals, author responses, correction outcomes, false-positive indicators, and limitations.	Prevents traffic, allegation volume, or retraction counts from substituting for quality measures.
Data integration	External data relationships are identified.	Provenance, update frequency, downstream recipients, correction propagation, licensing, and access conditions are disclosed.	Prevents preliminary or incomplete signals from acquiring unexplained institutional authority.
Conference governance	Organisers, speakers, sponsors, and registration arrangements are public.	Speaker-selection criteria, committee roles, financial support, recusals, and relevant cross-affiliations are disclosed.	Makes prestige allocation and agenda setting more transparent.
Awards and fellowships	Eligibility and selection criteria are stated.	Judges, scoring procedures, funding sources, conflicts, recusals, and relationships with recipients are disclosed.	Reduces perceived favouritism and closed-network selection.

Table 7. Transparency indicators for research-integrity platforms, organisations, blogs, and conferences

The framework is proportional rather than a universal legal code. A personal publication may meet the minimum through accountable authorship or hosting, precise sourcing, correction, disclosure of material interests, and a meaningful reply. A major platform or funded organisation should satisfy the enhanced standards because its decisions are more persistent, scalable, and consequential.

8.5 Comparative transparency and the accountability gap

CSI and Retraction Watch publish leadership, board, donor, revenue-category, project, and tax information [7–9]. That comparative visibility is not proof of completeness or effectiveness. Organisational diversification creates additional unanswered questions about donor conditions, cross-project conflicts, database challenges, correction and appeal performance, institutional access, recusals, and separation among journalism, fundraising, awards, data services, and funded investigations. PubPeer publishes commenting rules, evidentiary expectations, anonymity

arrangements, moderation statements, author notification, and a right of reply [5–6]. Those are self-described procedures, not evidence of consistent application. Its institutional significance now warrants public reporting on governance, moderator appointment and expertise, whitelisting and greylisting, aggregate outcomes, appeals, dashboard terms, confidential identity and conflict checks, and the treatment of exonerating outcomes. Smaller personal, pseudonymous, collaborative, and audience-supported sites vary widely. Their reporting burden can be lighter, but basic obligations remain where identifiable researchers are criticised: traceable evidence, clear separation of inference from fact, a response route, visible correction, disclosure of material relationships, and updating after formal outcomes. Where public anonymity is necessary, the accountable host must bear greater evidentiary and corrective responsibility. Counter-scrutiny sites are not exempt. ScienceGuardians publicly claims verification, offline identity storage, neutrality, and donor-supported independence, while the reviewed materials do not name its operational team or donors or independently verify those claims [42]. Claims of verification and independence must themselves be verifiable. Publisher integrity teams also exercise consequential authority; official disclosure varies, and publishers should identify remit, qualifications, allocation, decision power, conflicts, use of external critics, recusal, and appeal [49–53].

8.6 Moderation, evidence, and correction transparency

Moderation determines what becomes visible, which evidence is accepted, how claims are framed, and whether responses receive comparable treatment. Major platforms should publish aggregate submission, acceptance, rejection, editing, removal, response, complaint, appeal, reversal, and correction data, with categories that distinguish evidentiary failure from tone, privacy, duplication, or legal risk. Protected identities and evidence need not be exposed for the exercise of moderation power to become empirically assessable. Organisations accepting non-public material should publish lawful-acquisition, authentication, access, retention, redaction, confidentiality, source-protection, deletion, and response policies. Possession of confidential evidence expands responsibility; it does not establish the truth of the allegation. Correction must have equivalent discoverability. A material amendment, rejection, non-substantiation, or formal resolution should be linked to the original record, displayed prominently, reflected in search and dashboard outputs, propagated downstream, date-stamped, explained, and retained in a version history. A technical reply hidden beneath a durable allegation is not procedural equality.

8.7 Annual disclosure and proportional accountability

Major actors should publish a machine-readable annual statement covering legal status; executive, board, editorial, moderation, technical, and advisory responsibility; donors, grants, service agreements, and institutional clients; cross-role interests; moderator appointment; confidential evidence; recusals; complaints; appeals; corrections; reversals; access arrangements; and limitations of impact metrics. Consolidation matters because dispersed disclosure is precisely what leaves the network hidden in plain sight. Requirements should scale from accountable sourcing, correction, reply, and material-interest disclosure for an individual actor to financial reporting, moderation statistics, client and data-access information, correction audits, recusal rules, and external appeal for major platforms, nonprofits, conferences, databases, and infrastructure providers. Institutional power, not an actor's self-description, determines the burden.

9. Risks, ethical limitations, and policy implications

9.1 Anonymity, protection, and accountability

Anonymity can protect whistleblowers, junior researchers, and others who reasonably fear retaliation. Universal public identification could suppress legitimate scrutiny. It also prevents readers from examining expertise, conflicts, professional competition, repeated targeting, or participation across related outlets. The defensible solution is protected contributor anonymity combined with accountable hosting: confidential identity and conflict checks, controls against deceptive multiple identities, auditable moderation, and independent complaints and appeal.

9.2 Amplification, context collapse, and unequal correction

A concern can move from a comment or specialist publication through social media, another outlet, journalism, conferences, dashboards, databases, publisher workflows, and institutional monitoring. At each transfer, the distinction between observation, moderation, verification, and adjudication can erode. Multiple appearances can look like corroboration even when they derive from the same source, evidence, or contributor. Responsible amplification requires provenance, disclosure of independent checking and contributor overlap, qualified status labels, and attachment of author responses and later outcomes. Correction must propagate along the same pathway as the allegation. Otherwise the network is optimised to disseminate suspicion but structurally incapable of repairing the harm of error. Some commentary uses personalised, sarcastic, or accusatory language. This study did not conduct a systematic site-level discourse analysis and therefore does not classify a named site by tone. A future protocol should code unsupported implications of fraud, criminality, stupidity, conspiracy, or collective wrongdoing and compare their visibility with corrections, replies, and formal outcomes.

9.3 Attention, funding, and mission drift

Professionalisation can improve continuity and expertise, yet it can also make organisational success depend on visible activity. Comment volume, traffic, cases publicised, database growth, dashboard use, media attention, awards, invitations, grants, and associated retractions may reward salience rather than accuracy. Less visible outcomes—confidential clarification, withdrawal of an inaccurate concern, successful appeal, non-substantiation, or correction without controversy—must therefore be counted rather than treated as failure or silence. Funding affects which problems receive staff, infrastructure, and repeated attention even without donor control. Project-level disclosure should allow observers to distinguish public need, donor priorities, recipient expertise, institutional convenience, and measurability. No evidence reviewed establishes covert philanthropic control; the supported claim is that selective resourcing shapes salience and therefore requires transparency.

9.4 Infrastructure and classification risk

When public commentary enters databases, APIs, dashboards, publisher systems, or institutional monitoring, inaccurate metadata, outdated status, missing context, inconsistent classification, privileged access, and automated scoring can reproduce governance failure at scale. Crossref's distribution of Retraction Watch data illustrates both the utility and the risk of reusable integrity

information [10–11]. A record must not acquire greater certainty merely because it appears inside trusted infrastructure.

9.5 Concentrated prestige and reciprocal protection

Conferences and awards distribute expertise, money, and legitimacy. Repeated participation by organisers, judges, recipients, speakers, board members, project leaders, or platform representatives may reflect genuine expertise, but it also concentrates agenda-setting opportunity. Cross-disclosure, open criteria, case-specific conflicts, recusals, and external participation are required if recognition is to be distinguished from closed-network reinforcement. Critics and whistleblowers may face retaliation, harassment, legal threats, doxxing, financial insecurity, or burnout. Those risks justify protected reporting and anti-retaliation measures; they do not justify unsupported accusation, anonymous organisational decisions, or refusal to correct. Ethical governance must protect good-faith critics and criticised researchers through reciprocal, evidence-based safeguards.

9.6 Evidentiary boundary

The primary sources reviewed do not substantiate corruption, a concealed controlling organisation, coordinated political direction, or improper funder control, and those propositions are not findings. The record does substantiate funding, professionalisation, role accumulation, data integration, recurring dissemination pathways, and uneven disclosure. Those conditions are sufficient to require stronger governance without converting association into accusation.

9.7 Risk–control matrix

The principal risks identified in the analysis and their proportionate safeguards are consolidated in Table 8.

Risk	Potential consequence	Proportionate safeguard
False, incomplete, or overstated concern	Reputational and professional harm before formal adjudication	Evidentiary review, qualified language, author notification, correction procedures, and independent appeal
Anonymous competing interest	Readers cannot assess relevant expertise, relationships, or secondary interests	Confidential identity verification and competing-interest disclosure to the platform
Amplification without independent verification	Repetition creates the appearance of independent corroboration	Source tracing, contributor-overlap disclosure, and labels distinguishing repetition from independent verification
Persistent or outdated allegation	Resolved or narrowed concerns remain searchable and influential	Prominent status updates, auditable version histories, and downstream correction propagation
Attention-driven case selection	High-profile cases displace less visible but important work	Transparent selection principles, outcome-quality indicators, and counter-metrics
Donor agenda effects	Funded priorities become dominant without adequate public explanation	Disclosure of grant conditions, project-selection authority, evaluation criteria, and decision rights
Conference and award concentration	Prestige and authority circulate through a limited professional network	Cross-disclosure, open selection criteria, recusals, and broader external participation
Infrastructure misclassification	Preliminary concerns acquire the appearance of formal institutional findings	Provenance labels, status differentiation, technical audit, and regular updating
Institutional delay	Public escalation, continued reliance on disputed work, and prolonged uncertainty	Acknowledgement deadlines, indicative timelines, interim notices, and confidential reporting channels
Retaliation against critics	Suppression of legitimate whistleblowing and post-publication scrutiny	Protected reporting, appropriate anonymity, legal support, and anti-retaliation policies
Weak author participation	A one-sided and potentially incomplete public record	Notice, meaningful right of reply, comparable visibility, and appeal
Mission drift	Organisational visibility or survival displaces accuracy and fairness	Independent oversight, balanced performance indicators, and periodic external audit

Table 8. Principal risks and proportionate safeguards

9.8 Policy implications

Table 8 consolidates the risks and safeguards. Three immediate conclusions follow: major actors should publish annual governance and conflict information; platforms affecting identifiable people should provide notice, evidence, response, correction, and independent appeal; and infrastructure providers should preserve provenance, status, access rules, and correction propagation. Functional separation must prevent the same unchecked pathway from identifying a concern, moderating it, amplifying it, distributing it as data, and converting it into reputational enforcement.

10. Governance framework for accountable post-publication commentary

The response to professionalised post-publication commentary is not immunity from criticism and not institutional suppression of legitimate concerns. It is functional accountability proportionate to funding, reach, moderation discretion, technical integration, and reputational consequence. Public-interest branding cannot validate a claim, just as formal institutional status cannot guarantee fairness. Critics may identify and analyse concerns; platforms may moderate publication; journals and authorised institutions should adjudicate formal outcomes; infrastructure providers may distribute accurately classified information; funders, conferences, and awards may support or recognise work; and independent bodies should review procedure. One organisation may perform several functions, but it must disclose and separate them sufficiently to prevent its own repetition from masquerading as external confirmation.

10.1 Separation of criticism, moderation, adjudication, and downstream use

Every stage must retain its own label and evidentiary status. An observation or request for clarification is not a finding of misconduct. Moderation decides whether content satisfies a host's rules; publication does not certify scientific accuracy. Adjudication belongs to bodies with authority, relevant records, and fair procedure. Databases, dashboards, indexers, and publisher systems may distribute status information but must not convert unresolved criticism into an adverse formal classification. This separation is the core defence against networked authority. A signal may legitimately move between actors, but its provenance, uncertainty, response record, and final outcome must move with it. No downstream interface should make derivative repetition appear more independent or more conclusive than the originating evidence.

10.2 Minimum due-process architecture

A minimum due-process architecture requires timely notice to an affected author or institution, identification of the publication and evidence, qualified language, a reasonable opportunity to retrieve records and respond, and placement of that response with comparable visibility. It also requires date-stamped correction of factual error or material overstatement and an appeal decided by someone independent of the original moderation decision. 1. The record must display final status prominently, including correction, retraction, institutional finding, exoneration, non-substantiation, or closure without a formal outcome. Anti-retaliation protection for good-faith critics must coexist with protection against duplicative, personalised, disproportionate, or evidentially purposeless commentary. 2. PubPeer states evidentiary and tone rules, restrictions on direct misconduct allegations, author notification, and a reply mechanism [6]. The proposed architecture goes further because a platform's own description cannot demonstrate consistent enforcement: independent appeal, conflict checks, moderation reporting, correction performance, and downstream status updating must be externally assessable.

10.3 Annual transparency statements

Major platforms, nonprofits, funded projects, conferences, award bodies, and infrastructure providers should publish standard annual transparency statements identifying legal status; decision-makers; editorial, moderation, technical, and advisory responsibility; donors and funding bands; earmarks; service contracts; institutional clients; dashboard and API arrangements; relevant consultancy and speaking support; award roles; conflicts; recusals; complaints; appeals; corrections; reversals; confidential evidence; and material governance changes. Human- and machine-readable reporting would permit longitudinal and cross-organisational comparison and end the present dependence on reconstructing a consequential network from scattered webpages. Existing CSI disclosures on leadership, projects, donors, revenue types, and tax returns [7–9] provide part of the record but do not replace cross-project, moderation, access, correction, recusal, and performance reporting.

10.4 Moderation accountability

Moderation is an exercise of authority over visibility, evidence, framing, and reply. Major platforms should report submissions, acceptances, rejections, edits, removals, time to decision, author responses, complaints, appeals, reversals, corrections, and status updates, using categories that

distinguish evidence, tone, privacy, duplication, legal risk, new information, and formal resolution. Without those data, observers cannot determine whether moderation rules are applied consistently, whether favourable access is concentrated among recurring accounts, or whether correction and appeal are meaningful. Secrecy about aggregate procedure is not required to protect individual whistleblowers.

10.5 Governance of evidence and confidential information

Where private tips, unpublished records, correspondence, laboratory material, or personal data are accepted, the host should publish rules for lawful acquisition, authentication, minimisation, access, storage, redaction, retention, deletion, source protection, sharing, legal review, and response. Confidential evidence may justify confidentiality; it does not justify unreviewable organisational discretion or a presumption that an allegation is true.

10.6 Governance of dashboards, APIs, and institutional access

Crossref distribution of Retraction Watch data and PubPeer's institution-facing interfaces show how third-party signals can enter scholarly systems [5,10–12]. Governance must disclose provenance, supplier, classification, update frequency, client eligibility, contractual and fee arrangements, privileged fields, redistribution, automated scoring, audits, and dispute mechanisms. Systems must distinguish public comment, author reply, journal response, correction, expression of concern, retraction, institutional finding, formal exoneration, and closure without substantiation. Integration may widen access; it must never elevate the signal's evidentiary status.

10.7 Competing-interest management

Disclosure is insufficient when a moderator, editor, board member, investigator, judge, or selector has a material relationship with the criticised researcher, commenter, donor, client, project partner, recurring contributor, employer, professional competitor, conference, or institution affected by the decision. The conflict should be recorded and responsibility transferred to an independent substitute. Repeated service across boards, projects, conferences, consultancy, speaking, funding, and awards may be legitimate, but the combined roles must be visible. An organisation that insists association is harmless should still be willing to disclose it; recusal is a procedural safeguard, not an accusation.

10.8 Conference and award governance

Conferences should publish organising and programme responsibilities, sponsors, selection methods, invited and competitive routes, travel or speaking support, cross-affiliations, conflicts, recusals, and material financial arrangements. Award bodies should publish nomination and eligibility rules, judges and affiliations, funding, donor involvement, scoring procedures, case-specific conflicts, recusals, value and permitted use of awards, and post-award reporting. These requirements are especially important when organisers, judges, recipients, fund administrators, project leaders, and later selectors overlap. Prestige is a form of institutional power and should be governed with the same seriousness as money or moderation.

10.9 Independent ombudsperson and external review

Major actors should establish an independent ombudsperson or external-review body for moderation disputes, refusal to correct, unequal reply visibility, conflicts, confidential evidence, disproportionate targeting, access complaints, status failures, and departures from published procedure. It should not decide research misconduct; its jurisdiction is procedural fairness and organisational accountability. An annual report should state the number and type of complaints, reviews accepted, recommendations, implementation, recurring weaknesses, and unresolved matters. Independence requires that the reviewer not depend on the same managers whose decisions are under examination.

10.10 Proportional implementation model

Governance obligations should be scaled according to authority and potential consequences rather than imposed identically on every actor. The proposed model is summarised in Table 9.

Actor level	Typical actor	Core requirements
Level 1: Individual or small volunteer actor	Personal blog, independent commenter, or small volunteer site	Clear sourcing; distinction between fact and interpretation; contact route; correction policy; meaningful right of reply; disclosure of material interests
Level 2: Established or audience-supported publication	Specialist blog, collaborative wiki, donation-supported site, or recurring contributor network	All Level 1 safeguards; funding and support disclosure; contributor policy; evidence-handling rules; complaint mechanism; visible amendment history; competing-interest declarations
Level 3: Major platform or nonprofit organisation	Large post-publication platform, funded nonprofit, or database operator	All Levels 1 and 2 safeguards; annual financial and governance reporting; moderation statistics; independent appeals; external review; recusal rules; board and donor disclosure
Level 4: Infrastructure or institutional service provider	API provider, dashboard operator, publisher workflow system, or scholarly-data intermediary	All preceding safeguards; data-provenance reporting; client and access disclosure; correction propagation; status classification; technical audit; contractual transparency
Level 5: Soft-governance institution	Conference, award programme, training provider, or recognition body	Organiser and judge disclosure; sponsor transparency; published selection criteria; cross-affiliation declarations; recusal procedures; public competing-interest policy

Table 9. Proportional governance framework

Table 9 scales the obligations from individual commentary to platforms, institutional services, conferences, and awards. It rejects both disproportionate bureaucracy for small actors and the claim that informal origins excuse a powerful platform from institutional accountability.

10.11 Performance indicators

Governance quality should be assessed through measures of accuracy, fairness, responsiveness, and correction rather than activity alone. Suggested indicators are presented in Table 10.

Domain	Suggested indicator
Accuracy	Proportion of published concerns subsequently substantiated, narrowed, corrected, withdrawn, or rejected
Response	Percentage of affected authors notified and percentage submitting responses
Timeliness	Median moderation, notification, response, appeal, and correction times
Corrections	Number of material corrections, withdrawals, and status updates
Appeals	Number of appeals and proportion resulting in amendment or reversal
Due process	Proportion of cases with visible notice, response, and final-status information
Competing-interest management	Number of declared competing interests, independent reviews, and recusals
Evidence governance	Number and type of confidential-evidence cases, complaints, and procedural breaches
Infrastructure quality	Error rates, update delays, status-classification errors, and correction-propagation performance
Positive impact	Corrections, retractions, clarifications, and preventive improvements linked to the activity
Counter-impact	Unsupported concerns, uncorrected reputational harm, reversals, or formal non-substantiation
Diversity	Geographical, disciplinary, institutional, and career-stage distribution of cases and contributors

Table 10. Suggested annual performance indicators

Table 10 accordingly measures accuracy, response, timeliness, correction, appeal, due process, conflicts, evidence governance, infrastructure quality, positive impact, counter-impact, and diversity. Traffic, comment volume, retractions, awards, or media attention cannot establish success because visibility may reflect sound scrutiny, controversy, repetition, or error.

10.12 Proposed accountability architecture

The functional relationships described in this section are illustrated in Figure 2. The figure separates concern identification, evidentiary screening, moderation, author participation, formal adjudication, downstream infrastructure updating, and correction or external review. It also places funding disclosure, conflict management, evidence protection, role transparency, correction visibility, and independent audit within a governance layer operating across the entire process.

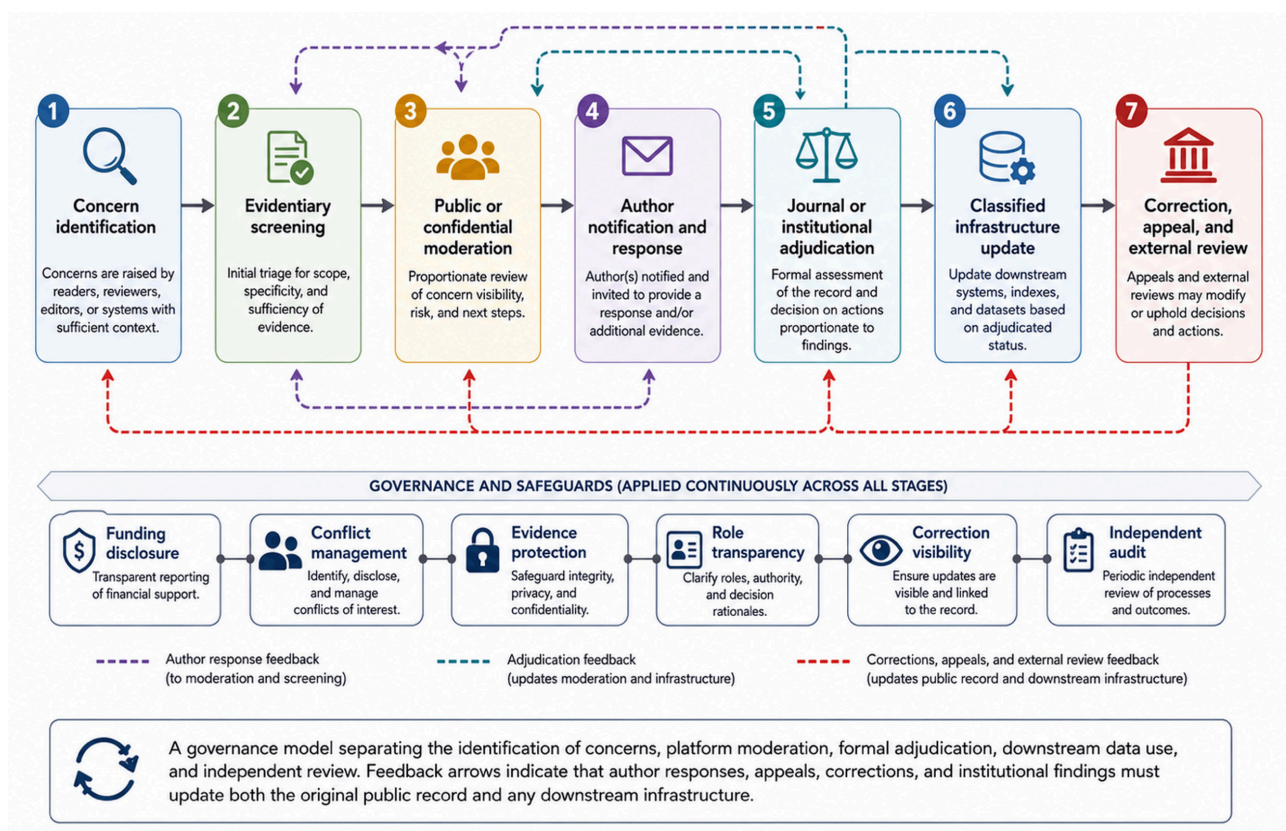


Figure 2. A governance model separating the identification of concerns, platform moderation, formal adjudication, downstream data use, and independent review. Feedback arrows indicate that author responses, appeals, corrections, and institutional findings must update both the original public record and any downstream infrastructure. Source: Author's proposed governance framework.

10.13 Implementation priorities

Implementation should begin with named governance and decision responsibility, visible version histories, funding and institutional disclosure, author notice and reply, separation of concern from finding, final-status labels, moderation reporting, and confidential conflict declarations for protected anonymous contributors. Institution-facing access and API terms, conference and award cross-disclosure, and publisher integrity-team remit and appeal routes should follow. The longer-term objective is interoperable provenance and status standards, cross-platform correction propagation, external audits of moderation and data quality, independent governance benchmarks, and systematic measurement of false positives, reversals, non-substantiation, and reputational harm. A network capable of distributing allegations internationally must be equally capable of distributing corrections and accountability.

11. Conclusion: What Hidden in Plain Sight Requires

Post-publication criticism now moves through comment platforms, journalism, blogs, nonprofits, funded projects, conferences, awards, publisher teams, databases, dashboards, and infrastructure partnerships. Together these actors can affect publication records, institutional attention, professional reputation, and scholarly metadata. None acquires authority merely because it is visible, funded, awarded, cited, or technically integrated.

The mapped relationships do not prove a secret controller, conspiracy, corruption, or coordinated targeting. They reveal something more ordinary and more difficult to govern: an increasingly institutionalised field in which money, roles, recognition, moderation, data access, and agenda-setting circulate through overlapping people and organisations, while each actor can point to its formal independence from the others. The network is hidden in plain sight because its influence is integrated but its disclosures and responsibilities are fragmented.

That fragmentation matters whenever one unresolved concern appears in several connected places and begins to resemble independent consensus. Correction, retraction, or investigation following a public signal derives authority from the later journal or institutional process, not from the volume of prior repetition. Conversely, a concern that is narrowed, rejected, corrected, or left unsubstantiated must not remain permanently amplified without an equally visible status record.

The necessary reforms are concrete: source and actor independence tests; confidential identity and conflict verification where anonymity is protected; cross-role disclosure and recusal; traceable moderation; qualified status labels; meaningful notice and reply; correction propagation; auditable institutional access; and independent appeal. Those who publicly audit science should be auditable themselves. Symmetrical accountability is not hostility to criticism; it is the condition that separates credible scrutiny from unreviewable reputational power.

12. Declarations and Author Statements

Author contribution

Edward Mason conceived the article, defined its scope and analytical framework, assembled and evaluated the publicly available source materials, developed the network and conceptual game-theory analyses, interpreted the findings, and prepared and revised the manuscript.

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This work received no external grant or institutional funding.

Use of artificial intelligence

OpenAI was used to assist with language editing. It was not used as an evidentiary source. The author independently checked the claims, citations, public webpages, tables, figures, and interpretations and accepts full responsibility for the manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no financial, professional, organisational, or personal conflict of interest relevant to the preparation of this article. The author holds no formal role in, and received no payment from, any platform, organisation, funder, conference, blog, award body, or infrastructure provider examined in the manuscript.

Institutional affiliation

Edward Mason is an independent scholar working in publication ethics and research integrity. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and should not be attributed to any university, publisher, journal, research-integrity platform, funder, or professional organisation.

Ethics approval

Formal research-ethics approval was not required because the study did not involve human participants, animals, clinical interventions, private participant data, interviews, or confidential research records. The analysis was based on publicly accessible organisational, financial, policy, conference, platform, government, database, and publication materials.

Consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Data and materials availability

The article is based on publicly accessible materials cited in the reference list, including official organisational webpages, financial disclosures, nonprofit filings, grant and award announcements, platform policies, conference programmes, government materials, database documentation, and publicly available blog content. No private database of personal information was created. The historical timeline, actor classifications, relationship map, payoff matrices, transparency indicators, and governance framework were developed from the cited public sources. Supporting tables and figures may be provided as supplementary materials with the published article.

Methodological transparency

The article distinguishes documented facts supported by identifiable sources from analytical interpretations derived from publicly documented relationships and from conceptual game-theory models. Propositions that could not be substantiated through the reviewed evidence were not treated as findings. Inclusion of an individual or organisation in a table, timeline, or network figure indicates only that a publicly documented activity or relationship was identified. It does not constitute a finding of corruption, coordination, misconduct, legal liability, improper motive, or influence over a particular editorial or institutional outcome.

Legal and evidentiary disclaimer

This article is a scholarly analysis of governance, incentives, disclosure, institutionalisation, and due process within post-publication peer review. It is not a judicial determination, institutional investigation, finding of research misconduct, allegation of criminal conduct, or legal opinion. Descriptions of grants, donations, awards, employment, service agreements, conference participation, board roles, professional relationships, platform functions, or data integrations should not be interpreted as evidence of wrongdoing. The article evaluates the governance implications of

publicly documented relationships and does not assert that those relationships caused any particular criticism, moderation decision, journal action, institutional finding, or reputational consequence.

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