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Response to Mirjam J. Curno
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Response to Mirjam J. Curno

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16

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to reflect on the area of publication ethics as related to scholarship responding to Curno’s invited paper, “Challenges to ethical publishing in the digital era”.

Design/methodology/approach – This viewpoint draws up the rich experience of the author over an extended academic career. The constructed view blends empiricism and literary sources to develop justified position.

Findings – There is resonance with Curno’s view. However, a counter position regarding the effect of the Internet on plagiarism is offered. Opinion is given which extends across disciplines rather than remaining in the confines of science and technology.

Originality/value – The response to Curno’s paper provides some alternative views and suggests directions in which the landscape of concern might be extended.

Keywords Confidentiality, Publication ethics, Plagiarism

Paper type Viewpoint

Ethical considerations in publishing span a broad and expansive territory and include both scholarly and popular material. Concerns in the former realm are very different from those that rear their ugly heads in the latter, where, for example, Clifford Irving managed to convince McGraw-Hill that he had an exclusive agreement with reclusive Howard Hughes to write his biography; he did not. He received an astonishing three-quarters of a million dollar advance; he also went to prison! Mirjam J. Curno, of course, deals exclusively with scholarly ineptitude and I limit my remarks to this domain where “misconduct” is, perhaps foolishly, officially limited to falsification, fabrication and plagiarism, merely the worst offenders among many others. It should also be noted that publishing is but the final avatar in a long chain of necessities that includes intention, collaboration, research, analysis, articulation, peer review, revision, acceptance and sometimes payment (in both directions) — each one of which is rife with unethical possibilities.

There exist many cultural, social, financial and academic forces that control a publication’s destiny; they include the following:

- The admonition to publish or perish, which forces academics and researchers to produce garbage;
- John P.A. Ioannidis’s insistence that most research is fatally flawed;
- pressure that causes lesser-known miscreants, such as medical doctors with PhDs, to, for example, plagiarize, and the more infamous, such as Stephen Breuning, Andrew Wakefield or Diederik Stapel[1], to selfishly cause real harm to the innocent;
- peer review, which is so fettered with problems that it should probably be expunged; and



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- metrics, such as the impact factor, which distort and control by forcing researchers to choose journals based on false or misleading criteria and which ultimately harm academics in review, tenure and promotion schemes

Even after the Second World War ended, it was still possible to pursue scientific research in a proscribed fashion. Two of my father's friends, who had worked on the Manhattan Project, continued with their research in physics and earned a living in their private laboratory! Today, matters are very different and big. Science produces big results because big groups of people collaborate (using big equipment). How is it possible to hold authors or publishers ethically responsible when 1,000 authors (including one's dog!) produce a single short paper?

When problems arise, three primary parties may be responsible: dishonest authors, inept editors and greedy publishers; a hexagonal labyrinth is completed by a secondary group: egotistical peer reviewers, librarians who willingly pay exorbitant subscriptions fees and open access publishers, who take advantage of contributors and their institutions by overcharging for page costs[2], but especially predatory journals, which exist primarily to earn extraordinary sums of money rather than to further the dissemination of knowledge. Instead of improving, scrupulous and ethical research and, therefore, publishing are under duress. Recently, a group of scholars replicated 100 psychology experiments and discovered that "[m]ore than 60 of the studies did not hold up [...]" (Carey, 2015, A13), which is, concomitantly, indicative of the ineffectiveness of the peer review process.

The Internet's effect

Despite the single dissenting paper that Curno cites in her incisive overview, I am sceptical: Plagiarism predates the Internet, but the Internet must certainly facilitate textual and image theft on a massive scale, just as it allows detection through various software packages. But regardless of where the truth lies, this is not an off-setting situation. It has turned instructors, authors and especially editors into suspicious detectives who must waste their time searching out the derelictions of the dishonest, a development that is highly offensive to those who act ethically. I, for one, refuse to capitulate and trust the authors who submit papers to the *Journal of Information Ethics* and other publications that I edit, and this is perhaps foolish, since I receive contributions from a wide global community, including China, Nigeria, Botswana, Iran, Kuwait, Thailand and Nepal, countries where cultural mores (and ethical commitment) may be very different than in the Western world. Plagiarism is a virulent scholarly ailment; thus, it should be rooted out, destroyed and its perpetrators punished. Three additional complications reside in human fallibility: Even superb scholars make mistakes and errors sneak into the record and remain, unless discovered and extirpated. An occasional error is not fatal, but an agglomeration of mistakes may comprise some minor form of misconduct. Second is digital piracy: a legitimate publication appears online and produces income for its author. Someone reproduces the book (with a different author's name and cover) and sells it, thus cutting into the real author's profits. Third, immediacy of publication and access are certainly the key advantages of digitization, but these are closely followed by the ability to provide in-text links to related material. The problem here is that these links often lead nowhere; also, the rate at which links expire or sites die is extremely high.

Confidentiality

It is a given that confidences must be protected during the editorial process, but not everyone agrees that double blinding in peer review is beneficial. Stanley Fish insists that knowing who the author is, is helpful when evaluating a paper (and in limited disciplinary areas, it is possible to deduce authorship); also, knowing who the reviewer is, may be beneficial to the corrected author. In cases of suspected misconduct, it behooves an editor to share this information with fellow editors so that the record can be corrected and the perpetrator forestalled from continuing to contaminate. This presents an irreconcilable dilemma to the editor committed to confidentiality.

Metrics incentivization

I have long argued[3] that, as Curno insists, quantitative metrics including the number of publications and citations and various impact factors distort, seduce and harm academics, authors, journals and institutions in many ways.

Solutions

One of the reasons why scholars falsify, fabricate and plagiarize (among other misdeeds) is that they often are not punished at all, or if they are, the punishment is ludicrously ineffective. Instead of losing positions, paying hefty fines, being precluded from publishing anywhere (through editorial collusion, so to speak), or spending some time in prison, they are barred from the USA federal grants for three years or (horror of horrors) they are not allowed to act as peer reviewers.

Every graduate institution should offer a required seminar on ethical (and legal) practices in scholarly endeavors. A student's discipline is irrelevant. Everyone in medicine, law, chemistry, anthropology, or art history, among others, requires ethical sensitization to correct protocols and actions in dealing with human and animal subjects, research methodologies and publication practices. The haphazard manner in which one learns all of these subtleties as one struggles with courses and examinations, theses and dissertations, has the harmful results because of which we now suffer.

Conclusion

Curno's paper emphasizes scientific research and publication (in the five hard sciences), but it should be kept in mind that many humanistic and social scientific disciplines exist, and the problems endemic in the hard sciences can also be found in, for example, literary criticism, history or economics; transference is especially blatant in those subject areas, such as psychology, that have inappropriate pretensions to scientific methodology and rigor. The author also emphasizes the horrors of plagiary to the exclusion of falsification and fabrication. Plagiarism merely harms the publication, but falsifying or, worse, fabricating data harms the historical record and human beings, who may suffer or die because of a distorted clinical trial, for example[4].

Notes

1. See Stapel's revelatory *Faking Science: A True Story of Academic Fraud*. 2014. (The English translation is available only online; the original Dutch version, *Ontsporing*, was published in 2012.) <https://errorstatistics.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/fakingscience-20141214.pdf>
2. Even prestigious journals, such as *PLoS Biology*, overcharge contributors, almost \$3,000 per article in this case. (And naturally, enormous legitimate publishing conglomerates, such as

Elsevier, offer bundled packages of many hundreds of journals to libraries for a million dollar subscription fee.)

3. See the discussion of metrics in my *Documentation* (Hauptman, 2008, pp. 189-199).
4. Two superb studies that offer insight into ethical considerations in publishing are Marcel C. LaFollette, *Stealing into Print*, Berkeley: University of California, 1992 and Richard Smith, *The Trouble with Medical Journals*, London: The Royal Society of Medicine Press, 2007. The authors' remarks, though sometimes geared to traditional publication, are equally germane to digital dissemination.

Response to
Mirjam J.
Curno

19

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About the author

Robert Hauptman is a retired university professor, author and editor of the *Journal of Information Ethics*. His recent books include *Documentation*, *Authorial Ethics* and *The Summit of all Fears* (on mountaineering, and forthcoming). Robert Hauptman can be contacted at: hauptman@stcloudstate.edu

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