Publication ethics: stressing the positive

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Received 26 October 2015
Revised 26 October 2015
Accepted 5 November 2015

Abstract

Purpose – This paper discusses the publication "Challenges to ethical publishing in the digital era".

Design/methodology/approach – It is a critical analysis of the paper built around two main arguments: the need to stress the positive in ethical debates; the critique of apolitical professionalism; the crucial need to stress the ties between politics and ethics.

Findings – No finding — it was simply argument.

Research limitations/implications – Provocative challenge to dominant ethical debates.

Practical implications – The need to challenge the myths of professionalism.

Originality/value – The need for the academe to embrace more the work coming out of the alternative public sphere.

Keywords Ethics, Politics, Electronic publishing, Journalism ethics

Paper type Viewpoint

When I was first contacted by Professor Simon Rogerson over responding to a paper exploring publication ethics in the Internet era, I immediately thought of the wonderful possibilities which have been opened up for improving and expanding the academe.

The journal which I have co-edited since it was launched in 2003, *Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics*[1], is itself a child of the Internet. Our editorial group members, for instance, come from a wide range of countries, including Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Malta, New Zealand, Spain and the USA, and papers have appeared from colleagues all over the globe. How amazing! The opportunities for worldwide collaborations now are enormous. One of our recent editions was an Australian "special" drawing on contributions by five leading researchers from Down Under.

My instinctive reaction, then, when thinking of ethics is to focus on the "good". I am concerned to explore examples of "good" journalism and to present them to my students as models. It is true that I often have to move beyond the mainstream to "alternative" publications. And given the overall bias in higher education journalism teaching towards corporate, mainstream media this focus on alternative, radical, progressive, activist media, in effect, amounts to a *political* decision. This stress on the ties between ethics and politics (so often ignored) is to be the main theme of this paper. Professionalism as an ideology serves essentially to de-politicise workplace issues: One of the main roles of ethicists is to restore the politics to the debate!

Given my instinctive celebration of the "good", I was surprised, then, when I saw the paper on publication ethics concentrated largely on misconduct issues, such as plagiarism and conflicts of interest. In many respects, the paper is following the conventional bias of ethical inquiry which tends to focus on the negative; in my field of

Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society
Vol. 14 No. 1, 2016
pp. 20-23

1477-996X
DOI 10.1108/JICES-10-2015-0037

journalism, for instance, concerns tend to focus on the ways media trivialise and distort important, though often complex, issues and promote racism, sexism, militarism and so on. The recent Leveson inquiry was typical in that it threw the spotlight on illegal hacking activities by journalists and their too-close ties to leading politicians[2]. Surely, far more attention in ethical debates should be given to the positive.

The politics of self-plagiarism

During my 12 years of editing *Ethical Space*, I have never had to deal with a case of plagiarism. Perhaps I have been lucky. Given the journal carries articles by ethics specialists that is perhaps not surprising! But there is one aspect of this issue which has not been mentioned in the excellent discussion paper: how to handle a submission where the author has failed to acknowledge their own self-plagiarism. The author draws a copy drawn from their previous publication/s (sometimes word-for-word) but no attribution is provided.

The issue was recently the subject of a feature in the *Times Higher Education* supplement[3]. Cambridge University academics Peter Walsh and David Lehmann claimed to have discovered, on the basis of a study of 29 works by the distinguished sociology theorist Zygmunt Bauman:

> […] substantial quantities of material that appear to have been copied near-verbatim and without acknowledgement from at least one of the other books sampled. Several books contain very substantial quantities of text – running into several thousands of words, and in the worst case almost twenty thousand – that have been reused from earlier Bauman books without acknowledgement.

This recycling of prose, they suggested, constituted a monstrous "deception" by Bauman, undermining one of the fundamental pillars of credible scholarship — the ability to cite with authenticating safeguards[4]. But as Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux point out in an article on the excellent alternative investigative website, www.counterpunch.org:

> This sordid affair, however, speaks more broadly to the tensions and conflicts so endemic to the neoliberal university today. It strikes at the heart of what passes for credible intellectual inquiry and scholarship, and reveals more purposefully the shift from engaging with the ideas that embody a life, especially one rooted in a quest for political and economic justice, to the penchant for personal attacks which seek to bring into question the character and credibility of respected authors[4].

Evans and Giroux support Bauman in his not citing his own work:

> Why we might ask is this necessary if not to simply further [authenticate] a system of intellectual propriety and policing that is less concerned with pushing forward intellectual boundaries, than maintaining what is right and proper to think.

I disagree with Evans and Giroux because I feel it is *always* important for an academic to attribute clearly when using previously published work — if only to clarify to the reader the development of their research and thinking. But they are absolutely right to highlight the *political* dimension of what appears on the surface an ethical, professional controversy. Indeed, higher education and, one might add, the ethical debates surrounding publishing, cannot be separated from broader political, social and economic forces:

> Politics is not alien to the university setting, but central to comprehending the institutional, economic, ideological and social forces that give it meaning and direction. Politics also references the outgrowth of historical conflicts that mark higher education as an important site of struggle. Rather than the scourge of either education or academic research, politics is a primary register of their complex relation to matters of power, ideology, freedom, justice and democracy[4].

Conflicts of interest in the post-Snowden era

Again, over all the 12 years during which I have co-edited *Ethical Space*, I have never had any problems in the handling of the peer review process and linked conflict of interest issues. Maybe I have been lucky in this, too. But I am surprised to see no acknowledgement in the publication ethics paper of the revelations made by Edward Snowden, the former NSA contractor, about the global system of highly intrusive surveillance operated by the USA and UK governments. Indeed, so much of conventional journalistic, political and academic activity appears to be proceeding in blind ignorance of the enormous implications of Snowden's leaks. For really now, it hardly makes sense to assure anyone of confidentiality — particularly when sensitive, highly controversial issues are being researched.

The Leveson inquiry (into the ethics and practices of the press), of 2011-2012, looked at the hacking of the mobile phones of various politicians, celebrities and royals — and a number of journalists were later jailed. The inquiry and report gained massive publicity worldwide. And yet, every day the state and its security/intelligence services intrude into people's privacy — yet with complete impunity! How can democracy claim to operate when the intelligence services are given the complete right to snoop on the communications of politicians[5]? And how can academic autonomy (and linked notions of confidentiality) exist when the state has the powers to snoop on research. By failing to acknowledge this, is not the publication ethics paper indulging in a subtle form utopianism?

The dangers to academics researching highly sensitive issues were highlighted in the case of Nottingham University student Rizwaan Sabir who, in 2008, was arrested under the Terrorism Act after downloading an al-Qaida training manual from a USA government website for research purposes. At the time, Mr Sabir pointed out that the manual in question was widely available, including in Nottingham's library, and claimed his lecturers had confirmed he had legitimate academic reasons for downloading it. Despite this, he was held by police for seven days before being released without charge. Nottinghamshire police later apologised and paid Mr Sabir £20,000 in compensation[6]. In July 2012, the *Observer* reported that the police had allegedly fabricated evidence against Sabir[7].

Further threats to academic freedom and the right to publish on sensitive issues in the UK have been highlighted by the decision of the British Museum to refuse to store a collection of Taliban materials — including maps, radio broadcasts and newspapers — because of UK anti-terrorism legislation. As the *Guardian* reported:

> The documents in the unmatched cache mostly come from the 1990s, when the extremist group ruled Afghanistan and hosted al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden. […] More than 2m words have been translated from Pashto to English, making the collection more accessible […] Alex Strick van Linschoten, an academic who was prominent in putting the project together […], said it would put other institutions off hosting similar archives[8].

Conclusion: ethics, the commercialisation of higher education — and the political response

The publication ethics paper rightly highlights the growing trend of universities recruiting staff in a strategy "geared towards winning the publication metrics game". Such policies cannot be separated from the onward surge of commercialisation in higher education — with the stress increasingly on "value for money", constant monitoring (with seemingly endless student evaluations and research assessments), viewing the student essentially as a customer of the higher education (HE) business.

The paper proposes a range of "professional" responses to the selected issues. But because their roots lie essentially in the political, social, economic and ideological fields, their solutions will only be found through political and social action beyond the academe.

Notes

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About the author

Professor Richard Keeble, of the University of Lincoln, has edited and written 35 books. In 2011, he gained a National Teaching Fellowship, the highest award for university teachers in the UK, while in 2014 he was given a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Association for Journalism Education. Richard Keeble can be contacted at: rkeeble@lincoln.ac.uk