

ENSAYO  
**A CITY IN THE HILL OR A DUNGEON IN THE VALLEY: WHERE  
ARE WE HEADING WITH OUR PRESENT PUBLICATION  
CULTURE**

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**ABSTRACT.** Many academic practices are questionable yet gaining increased practice. As a call of their responsibility, people concerned about such anomalies have expressed their agony on the issues in forums that have looked into some with a positive intent while ignoring others. Unfortunately, the ignored ones are growing daily, making ethically and intellectually sound minds cringe. This situation is largely due to a lack of corrective action in most cases due to a lack of resources and too few cases due to a lack of intent. This is a genuine review on the matter so far without highlighting any great institution (to undermine their reputation) or undermining the ignoramus ones (considering their lack of resources) worldwide. Instead, this article aims to highlight some of these anomalies for the attention of concerned intellectuals so that they can react quickly before it is too late for any remedial action.

**Keywords:** Research assessment, Publication practice, Research Ethics, Authorship, Paper Retraction, Plagiarism

**Una ciudad en la colina o un calabozo en el valle: ¿hacia dónde nos dirigimos con  
nuestra cultura de publicación actual?**

**RESUMEN.** Muchas prácticas académicas son cuestionables pero algunas están ganando cada vez más aceptación. Como un reconocimiento a esta responsabilidad, algunas personas preocupadas por estas anomalías, han expresado su angustia acerca de estas prácticas en distintos foros, algunos con una intención positiva, mientras otros ignorando estas prácticas. Desafortunadamente, los que ignoran están creciendo día a día, haciendo que las mentes éticas e intelectualmente sólidas se retuerzan. Esta situación se debe en gran medida a la falta de acciones correctivas en la mayoría de los casos debido a la falta de recursos y en muy pocos casos debido a la falta de intención. En esta revisión sobre el tema no se resalta a ninguna empresa de carácter global (para socavar su reputación) ni busca menospreciar a los que ignoran o se mantienen al margen (considerando su falta de recursos) en todo el mundo. En cambio, este artículo tiene como objetivo resaltar algunas de estas anomalías para llamar la atención de los intelectuales preocupados, de modo que puedan reaccionar rápidamente antes de que sea demasiado tarde para cualquier acción correctiva.

**Palabras clave:** Evaluación de investigación, Práctica de publicación, Ética de investigación, Autoría, Retracción de artículos, Plagio.

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There are many initiatives to keep the universities as cities in the hills. Institutes and individuals who can blow whistles do so with a positive spirit. Yet the impact of their effort is not changing the citadels of learning sliding fast to the dungeons in the valleys so far as the publication is concerned at least. Knowledge missionaries working hard to save the academia from paid publication for glory is not heartening yet. The San Francisco Declaration of Research Assessment (DORA) of 2013 wishes intellectuals to fight against the practice that has made them players in a fixed match they cannot win. It recommends, along with other measures, "to Challenge research assessment practices that rely inappropriately on journal impact factors, and promote and teach best practice that focuses on the value and influence of specific research outputs" (Cagan, 2013). Around ten years by now the practice is yet to pick up momentum as expected. Till now, 22,166 individuals and organisations in 159 countries have signed DORA's declaration.

Concerned academics can take all the pain to bring the bell and tie it to the cat, yet if the cat is deaf, they cannot help. We have to take two examples to

understand the problem brewing in academia with the help of academics themselves. In one such example one can cite what Jennifer A. Mott-Smith writes about in an article "Bad Idea About Writing: Plagiarism Deserves to Be Punished", published in *Inside Higher Ed*, and sums up in the conclusion: "Unless plagiarism is out-and-out cheating, like cutting and pasting an entire paper from the internet or paying someone to write it, we should be cautious about reacting to plagiarism with the intent to punish. For much plagiarism, a better response is to relax and let writers continue to practice the difficult skill of using sources" (Mott-Smith, 2017).

We can go back and look into the legitimisation of copying we had in the past. The creation of original texts, Pennycook writes, began to be valued only after the European Enlightenment movement. The quality of a text was intrinsically related to his former owner, a source of truth and authority, and the verbatim copying was considered a socially acceptable practice, widely used and represented the good quality of a text. Such practices also had recognition in some East Asian countries, where the knowledge passed down

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through generations as literally as possible in order to save their authority (Pennycook, 1996). In fact, we cannot ignore this practice and its resultant impact we still feel in academia all around the world as a matter of internalised practice rather than what can be called as deliberate attempt to plagiarise, even if they are analogous; if we consider the parameters by now established in a war against it to be used objectively.

In a book, *Free Culture*, Stanford law professor Lawrence Lessig negotiates what it can possibly mean to steal an idea for the people at fault: “I understand what I am taking when I take the picnic table you put in your backyard. I am taking a thing, the picnic table, and after I take it, you don’t have it. But what am I taking when I take the good idea you had to put a picnic table in the backyard -- by, for example ... buying a table, and putting it in my backyard? What is the thing that I am taking then?” (Lessig, 2018). This argument is catching the wild imagination of a wild academia instead of finding fault with what can be safely called as unreason. This is the atmosphere we have ushered for us by now: temptation to steal by any means.

Can this tale tell metaphor satisfy us? And as a result reduce the number of articles we find titled: “College Plagiarism Reaches All-Time High” (Kelly, 2011) from *The Huffington Post*, and “Studies Find More Students Cheating, With High Achievers No Exception” (Pérez-Peña, 2012) from *The New York Times* Headlines. The like of these articles will scream at us about an increase in plagiarism in academia unless we are yet to find we are deaf.

#### **You are wrong so am I, equals to both are right**

One example is highly due here to establish why this notion prevails. All concerned with academia in the higher level know that plagiarism has always been a curse in the universities from the beginning of its written history. Scanning through the issue in published papers on this topic one can easily see that many legal cells of reputed universities have categorically put on record that even if they are ready to punish not only the students but also faculty if they are found guilty, yet they lack the time to complete the cumbersome procedures to reach the final stage and give the verdict against the culprit just because the number is very high. Knowing this well, the ones who initially do not resort to such nefarious practice also get enticed into it to maintain parity with their not so scrupulous colleagues. This is not to claim that punishments were not meted and there was no positive effect at all. But that is not enough to become exemplary so that it can deter the followers of the wrong path.

#### **Ethically tenable and mathematically calculable**

One written document used in more than one place for getting any kind of benefit is unethical in any institution of higher learning is a known fact for long. This is the reason why a large number of Universities have declared it in their web sites for the benefit of the

students to get acquainted with the ethical parameters essential to maintain their reputation. Yet the spirit is not observed in practice in many ways in most of them. For example, a student collaborating with a supervisor in publishing a paper is not questioned largely, whether such collaboration is out of real work done or only recognition of the fact that the scholar concerned is showing his or her obligation which is made mandatory as a large-scale practice by now. The other side of this practice defies simple mathematics. The student cites, if it requires his publication as one paper if it is mandatory for his submission of thesis for the award of the degree and the supervisor puts it on record as one paper if it is required for his promotion. It amounts to two papers. If not, how they are credited in both cases? Now transpose it in the cases where there are more than two researchers working under the same supervisor; each of them shows on record that it is equivalent to one paper for each and it is not questioned by the authorities who are supposed to scrutinise it. Is this practice ethically tenable and mathematically calculable?

#### **Independent research, joint publication: whose Labour, whose succor?**

A supervision system is in place for academic research for almost two centuries by now in all the universities to attain a degree recognised as Doctor of Philosophy. Notwithstanding the fact that the researcher under supervision is expected to do ‘independent research’. The supervisor certifies it in the front matter, when the researcher submits the thesis. Yet during the process of research the papers published by the scholar almost always accommodates the name of the supervisor as an author. In some cases (the number is growing by the day), it is seen that the supervisor is the first author (also known as corresponding author) even when the contribution is supervisory/ornamental and not fundamental, as the researcher’s name appears in the second place. In such cases, it is definitely unethical in the part of the supervisor to declare the researcher’s work ‘independent’ later. The question we can now ask, on the premise of what the title of this article has it: are the observers who credit such work in favour of the supervisor and the scholar at the same time dealing with it mathematically and ethically and find it acceptable?

#### **Accountability is a misnomer of sorts**

Let us take a sample by now common. There are up to five authors to contribute (but not limited to) in many disciplines when they wish to publish their work. All of them claim the credit of one paper in their credentials to be recognised by the concerned authorities. Let us take that for granted as acceptable hypothetically for a moment. Then what about the papers which came with a claimer at the end of the published paper that all of them are equal contributors? Still it is taken for granted by the concerned authorities as one paper for each of them. So what the researchers are claiming is twenty percent of work done is equi-

valent to one whole work and the authorities who are supposed to question the validity of it are taking it for granted by and large. This practice definitely is not a fitting example of accountability; neither for the scholars nor for the authorities. Therefore, now onwards it should be considered as a publication anomaly to be shunned by the intelligentsia.

By now we are all acquainted with the types of contributors to whose name we can easily attach the signifiers; guest, ghost and gift as if that does not matter. If you belong to a genuine publication set up you can find it out without any verification. As is the rampant use of proxy in classes where attendance is mandatory and to a small extent in examinations despite the whole lot of preventive measures in place, so is the case with academic publication. In this atmosphere the genuine ones have as much credit for their research as the fake ones accumulate somehow or other, sooner or later.

#### **Profit-making from the labour of those who do not seek profit themselves**

Many attempts are made by some reputed universities to free their intellectuals from publishing houses running for profit. So, they all have their publishing units to give their authors a chance and not fall a prey to the outside agencies which invariably exploit them. In a world opposite to it, open access and predatory publication houses are hell bent to make profit out of the labour of the intellectuals. The way these publishers outwit the intellectuals with new gimmicks to get profit by denying their legitimate due is well known by now and needs no mention here in detail. The San Francisco Declaration of research Assessment (DORA) of 2013. Even when intellectuals desirous of publication are highly intuitive to gauge the trap, they will be in the pressure to maintain their performance record forces them to succumb.

#### **Intellectual glamour shaming showbiz killing intellectual spirit**

When the number of papers received by the journals of all kinds become unmanageable the editorial staff at desk as well as the reviewers struggle to cope. The staff at desk being fulltime employees for this purpose alone have no way out but to clear manuscripts at any cost. The reviewers largely fail to manage and that is never accepted by the journals or the reviewers themselves in any responsible manner. The major reason behind the failure of the reviewers is their being fulltime faculty mostly and busy for ten months in a year for other academic and administrative work. Most of them do it, rather force themselves to do it, as that gives them a status above those who are not recognised as reviewers of reputed journals (if not as editors at least reviewers). This is reflected in their curriculum vitae with pride.

The number of papers some journals get is simply mind-numbing. I will cite two extreme cases; one from what is known as English (inclusive of

everything that is not English going by any ethical standard or accuracy primarily valued in academia) and the other from the now considered one of the heavy weights such as Bioengineering (includes biomechanics, bio-technology, biomedical engineering, biochemical engineering, bioinformatics and so on). In response to a query by me one 'English' journal reported that they get around a thousand papers every quarter and that forces them to put a notice: 'submission is not open now'. In the second case, a journal confessed, with a disclaimer not to be disclosed by name, they first scan for the articles submitted from reputed institutions and simply forget to respond to the rest. A note in their website helps them a lot: 'If you do not get a response within a stipulated time assume that your submission is not fitting to the present scheme of things happening at our end.' By any academic standard of publication ethics, a rather bewildering and unbecoming way of response from anyone who claims responsibility of the highest order as a publisher of new knowledge.

This kind of attitude of the publishers and their complying editors' anathema has arisen in some intellectuals, justifiably so, apathy for publication in well-known publishers. One such reflection is found in the article written by T. R. Shankarraman. He writes explaining his case, "Why I Won't Review or Write for Elsevier and Other Commercial Scientific Journals", in the following manner: "peer review can be a flaming hoop you are forced to jump through, more difficult if you are not a native English speaker, if you are from a less-privileged background, if you are from a relatively unknown institution in the Third World". Further, "the process can degenerate into a situation where jealous peers and conniving editors disparage your work and obstruct publication, or simply display how racist, sexist and patronising they can be from their positions of power or anonymity. If I did the review, I would not be paid for it—that's how scientific peer review works—but I could include the journal in a section in my CV listing all the national and international scientific journals that I had reviewed for. I could even register on a commercial website where academics track and showcase their journal peer review and editorial contributions. Still, it was not my skepticism over the peer review process, nor my lack of interest in counting review-coup that brought me to refuse" (Shankar Raman, 2021). A befitting juxtaposition I came across to further the cause in addition to the previous example is genuinely elaborated by another sensible author Tal Yarkoni in his article, "Why I still won't review for or publish with Elsevier—and think you shouldn't either", makes it absolute: "Contrary to what a couple of people I talked to at the time intimated might happen, my scientific world didn't immediately collapse. The only real consequences I've experienced as a result of avoiding Elsevier are that (a) on perhaps two or three occasions, I've had to think a little bit longer about where to send a particular manuscript, and (b) I've had a few dozen con-



versations (all perfectly civil) about Elsevier and/or academic publishing norms that I otherwise probably wouldn't have had" (Yarkoni, 2016). The road of the academicians should not end in such blind allies of the publishers' monopoly.

### **Paying for glory; private and public alike**

A number of writers on the issue have already hinted obliquely that public institutions have been paying for the journals in which their faculty and researchers are likely to publish. But the fact that they are paying remains unknown to the institutions because of the lack of clarity of thought about it. So there is a need to make it explicit. Suppose one publishing group publishes two hundred journals in diverse fields of study. One institution covers only around forty of the two hundred and the rest are unlikely to be accessed by the members of the institute. Even then the concerned institute has to buy all the two hundred in a package at an exorbitant price. In my opinion it is a perverted way of extracting money from ones who cannot ever benefit from their purchase. But this is largely tolerated by a large number of organisations due to two reasons. First, even if they realise the loss and know the exploitation, make the sacrifice for the limited use their faculty to get acquaintance with the norms of publication in which they would like to publish for the world ranking of the institution. Second, they consider subscription to some group of journals is a matter of prestige. A third reason is possible in very small number of cases in which the institutions in question have big fund and that make them go for the largesse; exclaiming, if we can, why not!

### **Retracting the reported; but what about the already cited**

The issue of paper retraction is gathering mass for almost a decade by now. Volunteer researchers are taking great pain to intimate journals what is amiss, if it is so, in the papers they have published and why they should react fast and retract them before the damage is done. Some journals take quick action and report it to their readers as quickly as possible by leaving the concerned pages blank if it is an ejournal and putting a notice in their websites if it a print version. Yet some others react very late or do not react, as it is deemed fit, at all. This uncalled for behavior can be foreseen keeping in mind the repercussion that the contributor of the paper may demand the paper processing fees he has paid as some Open Access(OA) journals are demanding for publication.

There is a problem about the ones that are retracted quickly by the genuinely ethical publishers who do not take any such fees. That is related to what if the now-retracted-paper being referred to by others and are published in different journals. It needs to be addressed at this point of time and I hope with the ease of communicating electronically it can be managed with a positive outcome. One example is highly essential to drive this extension home. This can be

ascertained from the following article in which a paper published in *Nature* in 2006 is contested: Alzheimer's Research in Turmoil as Sleuths Cast Doubt on (Amrit, 2022). It goes without saying that this paper must have been used for reference and cited by many in a span of sixteen years from its date of publication.

### **Paper mills, Retraction volunteers hard earned reviews; some journals bite the bullet others throw it away:**

It sounds like a mill that produces paper not research papers as it is the case now, because such a thing is considered by intellectuals till recently not only as unethical but also impossible, as no one will buy papers from such mills, and therefore, they would not survive. The majority of known paper mills, according to many whistle blowers in this domain, originate from China (Hvistendahl, 2013; Schneider, 2020). It is also highly contradictory to note these 'paper mills' predominantly operate in research publication in medicine because of publication requirements for the promotion of practicing doctors also burdened with teaching and research simultaneously which gnats them no room for genuine research. There is evidence of paper mill operation in other countries, namely Iran and Russia (Else & Van Noorden, 2021; Abalkina, 2021).

Let us consider a case as it is discussed in many forums by now with opposite claims. We have figures in favour of both the parties. They sound equally convincing in absence of the other. MDPI is the largest open access publisher in the world and the fifth largest publisher overall in terms of journal paper output. If we believe in the MDPI Annual Report 2020. The report claims:

In 2020, MDPI journals continued to have a considerable impact in the open-access publications market (Anonymous, 2020). With the support of our authors, reviewers and academic editors, MDPI achieved great success in many aspects (Shtaltovna, 2021).

165.2K peer-reviewed manuscripts published online, an increase of 55.6% in comparison to the previous year;

50 new journals launched, and 13 journals transferred to MDPI;

35 days used from submission to publication (median values for papers published in 2020);

15 journals newly covered by Web of Sciences, 10 journals indexed in Science Citation Index Expanded, and 29 journals indexed by Scopus;

33 newly affiliated societies;

32 conferences held and 51 stand-alone webinars.

In consonance with this example we can take another publication house Taylor and Francis for

scrutiny. It has started a service called ‘accelerated publication service’. One can get its benefit in two ways, as it is mentioned in their website. Though this facility is not available for all the journals, it can be availed in some of them categorically listed elsewhere, and as to the duration of publication mentions two time slots applicable: 3-5 weeks and 7-9 weeks from submission to online publication. It claims: “As a publisher, Taylor & Francis uphold the highest standards of ethical publishing and comply with ICMJE, COPE and GPP-3 guidelines”. At the same place it also makes a statement about payment: “Authors are only charged if their paper is accepted; there is no charge for using the service if the paper is rejected.” (Anonymous, 2023).

#### **A fresh threat from a whiz kid named AI bot**

An AI bot wrote a paper about itself and it’s been submitted for publication. We need not go beyond what is reported in mainstream journalism to understand the situation. The following point as noted by *The Insider* summarises the whole of it succinctly: An artificial-intelligence algorithm called GPT-3 wrote an academic on itself in two hours. The researcher who directed the AI to write the paper submitted it to a journal with the bot’s consent. “We just hope we didn’t open a Pandora’s box,” the researcher wrote in *Scientific American* (Getahun, 2022). This might have prompted a researcher like Stuart Ritchie to submit in *The Guardian* an article titled “The big idea: should we get rid of the scientific paper?” Citing his primary concern; as a format it’s slow, encourages hype, and is difficult to correct. A radical overhaul of publishing could make science better (Ritchie, 2022)

#### **One More distinction is dwindling, A report or a paper**

In the all-out long distance run for achieving number of papers academics and the publishers of papers are fast forgetting that there is a genre called ‘report.’ This is happening without much difference in social sciences but with a cost to the pure sciences. Because of its specific nature of revelation reports should be a part of scientific publication, yet it is missing from a large number of publications. Even if some do publish reports, they do not categorise it and publish it in a separate section termed by a name specific and befitting for the purpose they serve.

#### **Paper, paper everywhere, how many more required!**

Academic publication should not be considered as flippantly as the order of the day in academia has taken for granted. All the academic institutions all over the world have to understand that a paper cannot be written by an academic just to fulfill the requirement of appointment or promotion. They can realise it by extensively falling back upon the basic research philosophies we are all aware about: Ontology, Epistemology and Axiology in practice. Or else, we are bound to face some new unethical practices endan-

gering the pious fabric of true love for the expansion of knowledge for the benefit of humanity, not only for the enhancement of matrix-oriented superiority of institutions at the cost of boosting fake research that get published, but also following a doubly fake process designed/invented for the purpose.

#### **To derive a joke of a sort from a positive note**

Let us end it with a-positive-note/joke-of-a-sort as if such an attempt can hide all our crimes against honesty(amnesty of a sort!) in academia; forget about the basic principle of the establishment: mathematically calculable ethically tenable. This is what Mark Twain said: “It takes a thousand men to invent a telegraph, or a steam engine, or a phonograph, or a photograph, or a telephone or any other important thing-and the last man gets the credit and we forget the others” (Twain, n.d.). He added his little might - that is all he did. These object lessons should teach us that ninety-nine parts of all things that proceed from the intellect are plagiarisms, pure and simple; and the lesson ought to make us modest. But nothing can do that. Why should we bother to name those who are no more to feel gratified about our mention of their name? Let us confine ourselves to those we can please to prosper and in return have the pleasure of being guest authors and avail all chances of gift authorship before ghost authors spread all over the horizon of the world wide web of academic altruism.

Everybody concerned should take the steps appropriate instead of blaming one cat here and one rat there. Otherwise by the end of this century all the cats put together will have become blind and possibly deaf also; and cannot see rats as a huge community devouring everything that is required from the responsible world of authorship and publication ethics. Whether it is DORA of 2013 or Cost of Knowledge Pledge in 2012, though they are good beginnings to foresee the evils of exploitation of intellectuals as if they are ignorant akin to the age-old proletariat and bourgeois equation, the result is not yet heartening.

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