

IRRESPONSIBLE AUTHORSHIP: A GROWING TYPOLOGY

Academic spam email (ASE) has become its own specific subgenre. ASE includes messages from predatory journals offering quick and painless processes, opportunities to serve on editorial boards, or calls to present at dubious conferences (Wood and Krasowski). Like all electronic communication, ASE takes time to read, sort, and delete. In a study of recipients of the 2015 National Institute of Health's K Award (a competitive career development funding mechanism), all respondents reported receiving academic spam emails daily, and over 15% of awardees indicated that they spent over 10 minutes a day dealing with them (Wilkinson, et al). In addition to being a nuisance, academic spam emails can provide challenges for new faculty members who are less able to determine the legitimacy of the quality of the offers due to a lack of experience. Even well-mentored developing researchers might be unsure of who to ask for guidance about the deluge of questionable opportunities. And because of this never-ending stream of email, it can be an additional challenge to determine when and how often to make the request.

These spam emails range from ones that appear to be legitimate publishing venues or conferences to those that blatantly invite the receiver to commit fraud. Some feel like they are a mash-up of translated politeness moves, mail-merge errors, and a lack of understanding about the expectations of academics. Others are amusing in their boldness or cluelessness. But underlying many of these spam emails are elements that bring to the surface the array of ways that authorship can be abused in scholarly writing.

In this article, we present one academic spam email and use it as a springboard for a tentative typology of authorship abuses. We don't claim that this list is complete, but we offer it as a way to investigate what we value about authorship.

THE CASE

On October 20, 2020, Rob J. Hyndman, a professor of statistics at Monash University in Australia, posted on his blog, *Hyndsight*, an unsolicited email he received from a Dr. Stutaluk Vladimir¹ (Hyndman, "Co-Authorship"). In this letter, Dr. Vladimir praises Hyndman's published works based on his Scopus profile and offers a "co-publishing partnership." In this partnership, Hyndman would "offer" authorship spots to

¹ A Google search for "Dr. Stutaluk Vladimir" returns only the *Hyndsight* blog post.

Vladimir's clients who are scientists looking for "scientific articles that are in line with their research interests." Vladimir ends with an apology if the inquiry is not of value or boring. Hyndman notes that other colleagues have told him that they have received similar requests (Hyndman, "Re: Inquiry").

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Dear Hyndman, Rob J.

Hope you are doing well.

I write this letter on behalf of authors seeking to co-publish. We have seen your previous works (<https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=7006914313&eid=2-s2.0-85063573156>) and they were considered to be of high quality. Therefore, I offer you a co-publishing partnership.

Our clients wish to buy positions in scientific articles that are in line with their research interests. As our partner, you can offer us a position or two in your work. In this way, we develop a network of scientists with whom we would like to partner. We hope you will agree that this type of partnership can be mutually beneficial, and beneficial for authors too!

If you are interested in this, please, let me know. I will forward all required information to you and answer all your questions.

P.S. Sorry for bothering you if you find this letter useless and not interesting.

Respectfully,
Dr. Stutaluk Vladimir

(from <https://robjhyndman.com/hyndsight/coauthorships-for-sale/> Used with permission from Prof. Hyndman)

The email contains language that masks the ethical dilemmas of selling authorship. Vladimir frames the arrangement as one that would be "mutually beneficial" and uses a discourse of equality and cooperation: "a network of scientists," "partnership," and "co-publishing." The invitation contains several niceties ("Hope you are doing well," "If you are interested in this, please, let me know," "Sorry for bothering you," and "Respectfully.") These positive words overlay the problematic request. His clients are "authors" who, although they would not contribute to the article in any of the ways that most academic organizations would recognize as central to authorship, would be willing to "buy positions" in scientific articles. They are not looking to collaborate or co-write an article. Instead, they are looking to "co-publish" and to occupy the position of authorship. In addition, the clients who are unable or unwilling to write

their own manuscripts are speaking through another author (Dr. Vladimir) to make the request to Hyndman.

It is also interesting to note the logic of the invitation. Hyndman is given the opportunity to commit authorship abuse based on his track-record of publications of “high quality.” There isn’t an appeal to a desire to help others or a call to even the playing field. Instead, there is a sense that Hyndman has written good stuff and so Vladimir’s clients want to attach themselves to that success. Certainly, the email implies, there must be room to squeeze in another author or two, especially if the price is right.

It would be easy to assume that Vladimir’s clients are merely too lazy, incompetent, or busy to compose their own scientific articles. In fact, we have caught ourselves falling into the trap of generalizing and moralizing about this plagiarism, much in the same way that instructors sometimes react to student plagiarism. Certainly the pressures and perverse incentive system for academic publication have led to a full-blown, underground industry to recruit, solicit, and monetize authorship positions in publications. This, combined with “author inflation,” or the growing number of authors listed on the average scientific paper, has created an avenue for these unscrupulous authorship practices (Tilak). Academic institutions are not blameless in this system, especially those outside the US. Just last year, the Chinese government prohibited universities from offering cash awards for publications in an attempt to curb unethical behaviors in academic publishing (Mallapaty). Researchers could earn awards that had been steadily increasing over the past decade (Quan, et al). Additionally, the Chinese ministries of education and science have asked their universities to stop promoting researchers based solely on the number of publications (Mallapaty).

China is not alone in trying to deal with issues of authorship. In a 2019 article, *RetractionWatch* co-founder Adam Marcus wrote about 123mi.ru, an online auction site for academic papers.² This site allows users to pay for authorship positions on specific articles that have already been slated for publication. In the example below, a first author position on a paper to be published in a lower-tier journal would cost approximately \$770.

² This site has been shifted to a “new design” site, <http://publisher-moscow.com/>

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The site makes the transaction as easy as possible. Users can contact the site by phone, WhatsApp, or email. It is a virtual eBay for authorship. These examples add to the growing list of authorship misconduct.

³ Translation provided by Google.

GUIDELINES

Many organizations have articulated requirements for authorship. For example, the International Council of Medical Journal Editors's guidelines for authorship lay out four requirements:

1. Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND
2. Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND
3. Final approval of the version to be published; AND
4. Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

In order to be considered an author, contributors need to add labor to the manuscript, participate in the composing process, and claim responsibility for the content. Meeting only some of these requirements is not enough to be added as a co-author. For example, contributing to a research project by recruiting participants to a study or mentoring the researcher is not, in itself, to allow a contributor as a co-author (COPE Council). Still, each discipline has different expectations and traditions around authorship, complicating matters.

In the field of rhetoric and composition, journals tend not to foreground concerns about authorship. Of the 25 active, accessible journals listed on one large public university library's website about "Important Journals in Composition and Rhetoric," only six had specific guidelines on authorship. Most of the journals that did have statements in their guidelines for authors were part of larger publishers like Elsevier, Sage, or Taylor and Francis; these journals had what appears to be more general authorship statements that stretched across the publisher's portfolio. This is most likely because composition journals don't have the same problem with authorship abuses as many articles are single-author, but it is notable that in a field that is acutely aware of authorship concerns, the definition of authorship is not explicitly stated in the submission requirements. (It may be that later in the submission process that authors have to attest to their role in the composition of the manuscript and aren't readily available on the journal's website.)

TYPOLGY

In our exploration of co-authorship for sale, we have encountered references and examples to a variety of irresponsible authorship practices. We offer here a rough typology of these types of misconduct:

1. Translation-plagiarism authorship

Translation-plagiarism authorship occurs when an article is translated (usually in its entirety by computer) and then republished as a new article, with new people claiming they authored the piece without giving credit to the original authors. In a recent study commissioned by the Russian Academy of Science, the Commission on Counteracting the Falsification of Scientific Research found problems with “259 articles from Russian authors, many of which were plagiarized after being translated from Russian into English” (Linacre). These papers had already been published in Russian and then were submitted as original research by different authors after being translated into English. Some of the original Russian publications appear to have been plagiarized texts themselves (Chawla).

Student writers have followed a similar pattern of translingual plagiarism by translating a text originally written in English into another language text and translating it back into English to change the wording of the original text (Sousa-Silva 72). Then, through the help of revision software like Grammarly, they are able to correct any grammar mistakes and to increase the paper’s coherence.

2. Gift or reciprocal authorship

Gift authorship is when a person is added to a paper who did little to no work on the paper. Sometimes this authorship is given in the hopes that it will be reciprocated (Albert and Wager 34). Gift authorship is often used as an incentive for others to get something in return, such as promotion, loyalty, or funding.

3. Honorary authorship

Honorary authorship is similar to gift authorship in that the added author has not contributed to the manuscript. Honorary authorship tends to rely on the reputation of the added name. Honorary authorship is given or received for many reasons such as maintaining a good work relationship among superiors or improving the likelihood of acceptance; there is even a custom in some communities for the heads of

departments to be automatically given honorary authorship (Bavdekar). This type of authorship abuse is fairly common: over a third of articles in six key geriatric journals contained an ICMJE-defined honorary author and 14.8% of survey respondents gave their department heads honorary authorship automatically (Verhemel). Sometimes honorary authorship is done without consent. For instance, Teixeira da Silva and Dobránszki report on a case in which Charles D. Michener, a leading figure in entomology, was added to a paper without his consent or knowledge (1462). In fact, the article made an argument that questioned the validity of Darwin's theories, even though Michener had written the introduction to an edition of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*; the paper was later retracted (Oransky).

4. Paid co-authorship

Paid co-authorship happens when someone pays to be added as an author on a paper that will be published. This can be seen in the Hyndman email invitation. Companies recruit published authors, offering money for co-authorship on their next papers. A study by Pravin Bolshete stated that some 16% of predatory journals, when offered money, were willing to add new authors to papers that they were publishing knowing that person did not contribute to the manuscript.

5. Bully authorship

Bully authorship occurs when names are added to the byline of an article because someone forces their way on through harassment or bullying. Often, these are asymmetrical relationships in which the bully holds a position of power. Mahmoudi argues that these types of acts are more damaging for international students who “are already disadvantaged by visa requirements and financial constraints, and such abuse exacerbates their insecurities over position and job prospects — particularly if it takes the form of infringement of intellectual property and unfair authorship positioning on publications” (494).

An extreme version of this could be labeled as the White Bull Effect. Alluding to the Greek myth of Europa, the term white bull refers to a type of manipulation and coercion used by people in senior positions toward inexperienced researchers. Kwok describes the disturbing machinations of the white bull: “The White Bull perpetrator uses his experience and deviousness to exploit uncertainties or ambiguities in research guidelines and prospers in poorly regulated, grey areas” (554).

6. **Fraudulent authorship**

This type of authorship abuse is the one that comes to mind when we think of plagiarism: it is the act of submitting something that someone else wrote, and it is the kind of literacy practice that can be particularly irksome (Howard 488). The name on the work is not the person who completed the work. While all of the irresponsible practices listed here involve some sort of fraud, this practice is one where the primary act is one of cutting and pasting text and claiming it as one's own. As such, it can occur on the sentence- or paragraph-level as opposed to the other forms of authorship abuses that often deal with the complete text.

7. **Paper Mill/Essay Mill authorship**

Essay mills are companies that provide papers to undergraduate students. These companies have resorted to more deceptive and illegal tactics such as compromising university websites (Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson). More than just a catalogue of papers available for purchase, these paper mills also offer customized writing services, or contract cheating, where students can receive a bespoke essay that will not get detected by plagiarism detection services like Turnitin (Medway). Some services will even adjust the writing quality of the paper to match the skill level of the student so as to avoid detection. Similar services are surprisingly available for dissertations.⁴

8. **Pharmaceutical ghost authorship**

In the past decade or so, there have been several sensational cases of pharmaceutical firms writing research articles and then looking for senior scholars to add their names to the manuscript in order to make it more palatable to biomedical journals (PLOS Editors). This type of authorship abuse feels particularly dangerous since it doesn't just undermine the idea of authorship; it also gives authority to these articles that are essentially advertisements for drugs. Sometimes this type of authorship can be deadly. For example, pharmaceutical companies hired "medical education and communication companies" (or MECCs) to recruit "key opinion leaders (KOLs)" and provide talking points for presentations (Marks 174). Additionally, articles "were often prepared by unacknowledged authors and subsequently attributed authorship to academically affiliated investigators who often did not disclose industry

⁴ See Meyer, Craig A. (2017). "Corruption, Higher Ed, and Russians (Oh My!)." *The 2016 CCCC-IP Annual*. <https://prod-ncet-cdn.azureedge.net/ncetfiles/groups/cccc/committees/ip/2016/meyer.pdf>

financial support” (Ross, et al.). In most of these documented cases, the industrial ties were not fully disclosed.

CONCLUSION

The variety of authorship abuses makes visible the complexity of our understanding of authorship. While the email that initiated our exploration of academic spam email and other academic authorship abuses can be dismissed as merely junk email, it is worth highlighting so that researchers can develop the awareness of these practices, especially those that are deceptive and attempt to lure unsuspecting early career scholars into questionable arrangements. Like many of the internet-based scams and schemes out there, it is easy to identify the ones that you don’t fall prey to or the ones that our email client filters out. It is obviously the ones that we don’t recognize that are most dangerous.

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