

Editorial

In search of an author

Willie Nelson's assurance that 'Death is not the end of anything' certainly applies to producing academic papers. Death is no impediment at all to the academic author. Richard Smith, sometime editor of the *BMJ*, writes of his own experience working with a deceased author:

One of the authors on the paper, the most distinguished of the several cardiologists, actually died before the study began. Yet that hasn't stopped him being an author on a recently published letter that he cannot have read in response to another letter that he cannot have read about a paper that he cannot have read. (Smith, 2012)

While Smith's author once had a life, the same cannot be said of Ike Antkare, who had 102 publications to his name and an h-index of 94 in April 2010, making him the world's 21st most-cited scientist. There is no Ike Antkare and there never has been (Labbé, 2020), though he continues to publish (e.g., Antkare, 2020). A dog, a hamster, a parrot and chimpanzees have all been listed as academic authors (Penders and Shaw, 2020). Even Larry the Cat has 144 citations and an h-index of 12 (Richardson, 2024).

This casual approach to academic authorship seems to have been encouraged by the profusion of ghost, gift, guest, and honorary authors who decorate academic papers. Managers of this, heads of that, friends of friends, people of power and influence, all reckoned – not least by themselves – to be entitled to authorship. In Medicine, author order is taken very seriously, authors struggling desperately – and oddly – to be last. In other disciplines, particularly Physics, authorship is so promiscuous that order scarcely matters, obscured by dozens of names, sometimes hundreds, occasionally thousands of authors who know neither each other nor, in all probability, who wrote the paper. Some author lists are longer than the papers they adorn.

The title pages of many an academic paper have come to resemble a *curriculum vitae* so thick are they with authors, each with its own following of institutional affiliations. Ambitious universities wishing to rise in the rankings can simply buy affiliation by recruiting highly cited authors and thus acquiring their citations. *Floreat* Saudi Arabia. The going rate is something like US\$70,000 a year, with no more than a week or so actually spent in the desert. Of 6,849 authors on the Highly Cited Researchers list of 2023, over 1,000 have been deemed fraudulent, up from 550 in 2022 and 300 in 2021 (see Jack, 2022). Gaming is universal. A sonic impression of a relatively modest 73 papers a year (you can see it here at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.25134926.v1>) reduces a year's production to ten seconds of electronic whooshing and seems to demonstrate just how far authorship has deviated from scholarship (Bornmann and Ganser, 2025).

Academics can now buy instant authorship online, rates varying by journal and place on the author list. Or they can simply pay an exorbitant article processing charge to an academic publisher who will publish almost anything almost immediately, no questions asked. Disappearing from an author list is just as easy; accused of plagiarism, one first author responded:

'After careful checking, I noticed that I am not the author of this paper despite my first authorship since it has been written by our previous medical writer.' (Romaric Loffroy as quoted in Joelsing, 2023).

Lengthening author lists have fuelled speculation about what role all these people can possibly have played in producing the paper. Some journals deflect suspicion that many listed authors may have done very little by requiring an account, published with the paper, of how each

has kept busy. Though well-intentioned, the result can be fatuous: ‘reading proofs’, ‘conceptualisation’, ‘visualisation’, ‘supervision’, ‘investigation’, ‘administration’ are neither illuminating nor, in all probability, true.

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (2025) has just published a definition of authorship focusing, somewhat perversely, on non-authorship: someone who is not an author may be a ‘non-author contributor’ and called a ‘participating investigator’. The Committee considers writing the paper, a task some might see as fundamental to its creation, to be beneath an academic, a job for a ‘professional medical writer’, a non-author:

The act of writing is seen as almost incidental to the work of scientific research. ... Writing is the ‘mere’ communication of results (Moffatt and Elliott, 2007, p.28).

But to the product of some real authors. Our first paper is by Johanna Dahlin from Linköping University and is a truly remarkable piece. On the face of it, the paper is about intellectual property rights in Stalinist Russia, not a topic which many would normally find gripping. But Dahlin is an historian and looks to the example of a single lone inventor to demonstrate the insanity of Soviet management of creativity. Lev Theremin was a remarkable man in the range of his inventions, which included the first television and devices for bugging the US Embassy in Moscow, but also in his apparent acceptance of the paranoid security regime under which he laboured. Not only did Theremin receive little reward for his remarkable endeavours – a large hamper of food, on one occasion – but he spent many years in prison, an environment he found conducive to inventing. Theremin had spent a decade in the US, he had seen greener grass on the other side, and yet he accepted the dangers and demoralizing drudgery of the Soviet system. An extraordinary man and an extraordinary tale.

Guillaume Detchenique and Gilles Grolleau from ESSCA School of Management in Angers look at sportswashing, the practice of exploiting the desirable in the form of sport to hide the despicable activities in which some organizations and national regimes engage. Think Saudi Arabia and the Olympic Games or Qatar and World Cup football. But Detchenique and Grolleau go much further than looking at how nasty people can disguise their nasty activities: they consider how their sportswashing efforts can be turned against them so that a much wider audience is made aware of their nastiness.

Roberto Cruz Romero, from the Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies in Berlin, writes about the role of openness in innovation. On the face of it, the more open systems are, the more conducive to innovation. But the assumption is misplaced. Firms and funders are not going to invest in the R&D required for innovation just to see competitors reap the benefits. It’s not a new argument, but the popularity of open innovation seems to have done little to suggest a solution to the basic problem.

We have just one book review in this issue. We also have some sad news; two of our editors have left, both having served *Prometheus* for decades. Peter Senker died last September at the age of 90, and Richard Hawkins has retired to a Canadian fastness to fight the good fight against Donald Trump. We are grateful to both for their efforts.

Stuart Macdonald
General editor

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