RESEARCH ARTICLE

Articles and statements

Short Communication

Why does 'PubPeer' not acknowledge 'Retraction Watch' as a media source?

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Abstract

Retraction Watch is a social media organization that relies on a blog to transmit information primarily about retractions in the scientific literature. One of the Retraction Watch co-founders, Ivan Oransky, is in fact a "Distinguished Writer in Residence at New York University's Carter Journalism Institute" and the vice president of the Association of Health Care Journalists. Sharing a common funder, a philanthropic organization, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, Retraction Watch regularly coordinates with a whistle-blower website that refers to itself as an "online journal club", PubPeer. Retraction Watch regularly cites and refers to PubPeer, and *vice versa*. It is therefore surprising that PubPeer does not list Retraction Watch on its "Press" and media coverage page. This potentially deliberate omission may be equivalent to a hidden conflict of interest, undermining the ethical fortitude and image of these science watchdogs, and fortifying the fake news era.

Keywords: Conflict of Interest; Journalism; Online Journal Club; Retractions; Whistle-Blower Website.

Short Communication

The Center for Scientific Integrity Inc. [CSI] and the PubPeer Foundation operate science whistle-blowing web-sites, Retraction Watch (Retraction Watch, n.d.) and PubPeer (PubPeer Foundation, 2017a), respectively. These organizations are financially linked, both funded by a wealthy philanthropic organization, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation [LJAF] (n.d.). However, neither site explicitly indicates that there exists this actual or potential financial conflict of interest between the PubPeer Foundation – based in California – and the CSI, Retraction Watch's parent organization, based in New York. Comments at PubPeer frequently cite Retraction Watch, while Retraction Watch frequently relies on and cites PubPeer comments to support its "journalistic" stories that reach a global audience. The President of CSI, Dr. Ivan Oransky, is a "Distinguished Writer in Residence at New York University's Carter Journalism Institute", and may be found alongside Salman Rushdie (New York University, n.d.) [Fig. 1A], a highly acclaimed and decorated novelist (Wikipedia, n.d.). Therefore, one can only assume, by this association, that

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Oransky must be of equivalent exceptional writing or journalistic standards. Retraction Watch imparts news, primarily about science retractions, and is thus an established news organization with a high monthly web-traffic. The media component of Retraction Watch is fortified by its powerful social media presence on Twitter (n.d.) [Fig. 1B], with thousands of followers, and Facebook (n.d.) [Fig. 1C], which are essential components to a media organization, and by the qualifications of its leader, Oransky, who is the vice president of the Association of Health Care Journalists (n.d.) [Fig. 1D]. One can therefore state that Retraction Watch is a formidable web-based media organization, supposedly specializing in science retractions, and that its leadership, primarily Oransky, are exceptionally trained and skilled media professionals.

Fig. 1. Screenshot A, B, C, & D

It is therefore highly surprising to note that PubPeer fails to acknowledge Retraction Watch on its "Press" page dedicated exclusively to thanking those news and media outlets that have profiled PubPeer, and thus given it supposedly positive coverage [Fig. 2]. The only plausible explanation that exists for this distinct media omission is that both organizations share funding from the same philanthropic organization, the LJAF, and that they do not wish to make this fact public. Such opacity and possible dishonesty by these organizations, whose parent organizations are charities, underscores their intended purpose, namely to increase trust in science and society through fair, honest and transparent transmission of information. Structural and financial opacity by Retraction Watch are not new phenomena, continuing to undermine public trust in this media organization (Teixeira da Silva, 2016). Oransky himself also has a rich history of hiding the truth about his academic and professional past (Teixeira da Silva, 2017a), especially in publicly visible professional profiles about himself. This also indicates a high degree of dishonesty. Secondary interests that influence primary interests, i.e., the foundation of a conflict of interest (Flier, 2017),

are also at the base of the corruption of journalism and honest journalistic practices in a fake news era (Teixeira da Silva, 2017b).

Fig. 1: (A) Dr. Ivan Oransky is a "Distinguished Writer in Residence" at New York University's Carter Journalism Institute, alongside Salman Rushdie, and a co-founder of Retraction Watch. (B) Screenshot of Retraction Watch Twitter top-page. (C) Screenshot of Retraction Watch Facebook top-page. (D) Screenshot of Oransky's profile at the Association of Health Care Journalists. Screenshot of (B) has been spliced together to remove redundant white spaces and to focus only on two Distinguished Writers In Residence. All screen-shots, taken on February 21, 2017, are used under the fair-use agreement for post-publication peer review (Teixeira da Silva, 2015). Sources: [A] (New York University, n.d.); [B] (Twitter, n.d.); [C] (Facebook, n.d.); [D] (Association of Health Care Journalists, n.d.).

Fig. 2: Retraction Watch, one of the most prominent science blogs in web media today, is distinctly absent from the PubPeer "Press" page (PubPeer Foundation, 2017b). The most likely reason is hidden financial conflicts of interest, as both organizations are funded by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation (n.d.). All screen-shots, which have been spliced together to remove redundant white spaces, and to form a collage, taken on February 21, 2017, and used under the fair-use agreement for post-publication peer review (Teixeira da Silva, 2015).
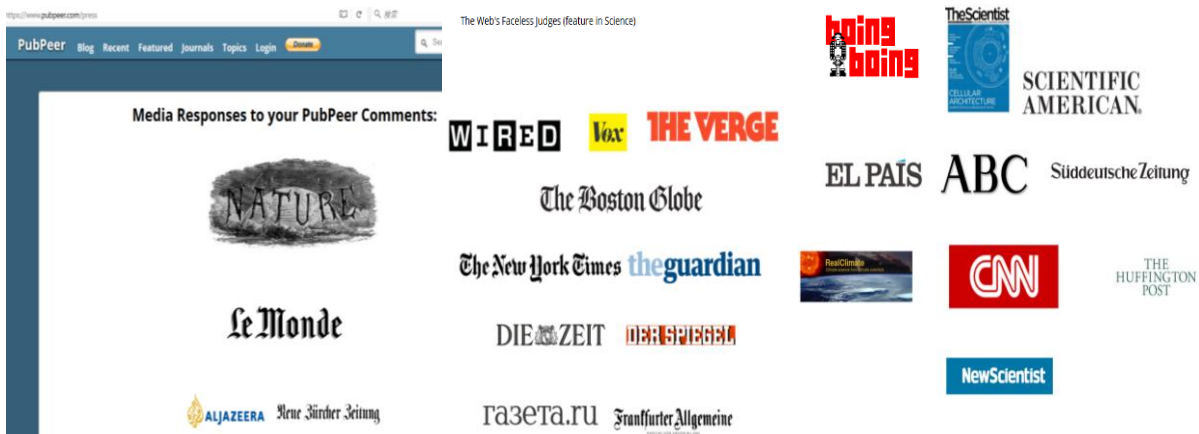

Fig. 2. PubPeer "Press" page

The correct thing to do would be for PubPeer to list Retraction Watch on that "Press" media page, and to also add a footnote to indicate that it shares a financial conflict of interest. In addition, each time Retraction Watch cites, or refers to PubPeer, for example when referring to comments that appeared on PubPeer related to a retracted paper or a paper being profiled by Retraction Watch, a footnote should also appear to indicate this financial conflict of interest in much the same way that any academic that publishes a paper should indicate actual or perceived conflicts of interest.

Conflicts of Interest
The author and his work have been profiled by PubPeer and by Retraction Watch. The author, who has in the past used PubPeer and Retraction Watch, both as a signed, registered commentator, and anonymously, has been banned from commenting on both websites. The author declares no other conflicts of interest.

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