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Freedom of Speech and Public Shaming by the Science Watchdogs

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Abstract

Freedom of speech in academia can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it gives the liberty to express opinions about issues that affect academics, but on the other, such freedoms can also be used against academics, even by other academics. Science finds itself in a state of reform, perhaps even crisis, in which a dense amount of transformational changes are taking place. As the academic playing field transforms itself, one method by which this is taking place is through the correction of the literature via an active process of critical analysis. In peer review, this is generally handled primarily by blinded (i.e., known to the editors) peers, while in a post-publication process, this may also be subjected to anonymous (i.e., unknown identity to authors and editors) critique. One of the more radical end-points of the post-publication process, which may reveal errors or faults, are retractions. Two organizations, Retraction Watch and PubPeer, are leading the way in terms of raising awareness and critique, but are using public shaming to expose science's faults and ills. These science watchdogs have now attracted considerable funding, including from powerful politically-driven US philanthropic foundations. Pressure is placed on scientists and academics by these organizations to be transparent, open and forthcoming about their errors. Scientists should cautiously assess queries made at or by Retraction Watch and PubPeer, directly or indirectly, and reserve their right to offer feedback. This is because what they state in response, either by email or on those blogs, may in fact be used against them on and by these public shaming platforms. The same applies to the blog of Leonid Schneider, another vocal science watchdog. Academia is at a cross-roads between openness and transparency, but at what cost? Academics need to urgently appreciate the importance and risks that Retraction Watch, PubPeer and similar websites pose, before their legends become irreversibly transformed by interaction with such watchdogs. This paper also highlights comment suppression, manipulation or blocking by these science watchdogs, which may indicate a deliberate suppression of freedom of speech.

Keywords: choices, error, fraud, Laura and John Arnold Foundation, philanthropy, post-publication peer review, pressure on academics, public shaming, PubPeer, Retraction Watch.

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Retraction Watch and freedom of speech in journalism

The Retraction Watch blog* is publicly advertised as a platform for “tracking retractions as a window into the scientific process”, even though it frequently deviates from this stated objective. Freedom of speech is offered special protection by the First Amendment of the United States (US) Constitution (Kanovitz, 2010), and journalists rely heavily on wide privileges based on this freedom to explore and express their ideas freely. Such is the case with Retraction Watch whose parent organization, The Center for Science Integrity Inc. (CSI[†]), is based in New York, in the CSI President’s apartment. The CSI President, Ivan Oransky, and the CSI secretary, Adam Marcus, together with their staff of journalists, have used this journalistic freedom of speech to critically assess a specialized sector of science publishing, namely retractions. However, unlike what is stated as the organizational motto and in the website banner, much more than retractions are assessed. Indeed, there is much to criticize about current academic structures and the sustainability of the scientific and biomedical publishing industry, such as excessive profits at the expense of the exploitation of academics[‡], and there are most definitely multiple ills that are now being discovered in this sector. Therefore, an understanding and discussion of these problems is welcomed, by Retraction Watch and by others. Such an understanding can be achieved when there is a broad base that allows for critical discovery, by scientists, journalists, or others, and the freedom to express ideas when such a platform is provided, as is the case at Retraction Watch, where reader commenting is allowed, albeit subject to moderation policies[§]. However, it is important to set defined parameters between criticism or critical analysis and public shaming, an issue that Retraction Watch has (conveniently) not addressed publicly. To what extent do scientists have to be held accountable to the CSI and its journalists, and should their right to silence be interpreted as opacity if they do not consider the CSI to be a valid academic or ethical entity? Academia, in this volatile period, is seeking to find answers and solutions to multiple problems, and finding a balance between the exploration of the topic of retractions, and the critical assessment of the current academic establishment, is challenging.

Prior to the creation of the CSI by Oransky, apparently in 2014^{**}, the author has the personal experience that commenting was fairly liberal at Retraction Watch. However, after the CSI obtained funding from US philanthropic organizations, comment moderation became stricter, with fewer comments being approved or with fewer opinionated comments allowed. This suggests that freedom of speech by academics on the Retraction Watch blog was and is being curtailed, or excessively moderated. The CSI has now received over 1 million US\$ in funding after obtaining 501(c)3^{††} status in 2015, although several specific details regarding the balance sheets remain obscure. The largest donors are the Laura and John Arnold Foundation (LJAF^{**}), the MacArthur Foundation^{§§}, and the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust^{***}. It is now known that the LJAF – led by an ex-Enron executive, John Arnold – has a publicly stated and established agenda against “bad science”^{†††}. However, in this challenging academic climate, it is difficult to distinguish policies and/or opinions that are anti-science or anti-bad science. Does Retraction Watch, by publicly profiling specific case studies of individual scientists, editors, journals, or publishers, or by collectively clumping them in their retraction database, in any way entrap innocent academics that might not be directly involved with the published Retraction Watch reports?

Journalists, especially in the digital era, are supposed to espouse moral and professional values that comply with established stated journalistic codes of conduct (Díaz-Campo, Segado-Boj,

* <http://retractionwatch.com/>

† <http://retractionwatch.com/the-center-for-scientific-integrity/>

‡ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/jun/27/profitable-business-scientific-publishing-bad-for-science>

§ <http://retractionwatch.com/the-retraction-watch-faq/> (see “Why was my comment not approved?”)

** <http://retractionwatch.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2015-990.pdf>

†† [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/501\(c\)_organization](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/501(c)_organization)

** <http://www.arnoldfoundation.org/>

§§ <https://www.macfound.org/>

*** <http://www.helmsleytrust.org/>

††† <https://www.wired.com/2017/01/john-arnold-waging-war-on-bad-science>

2015). This includes aspects such as open and respectful dialogue and discussion. However, the truncation of perfectly valid comments at Retraction Watch that are respectful in tone, and directly relevant to the discussion at hand, may constitute a violation of readers' first amendment rights, at least in US standards, and thus an abuse of moderation policies. Figure 1 highlights five randomly selected comments from dozens of comments made by the author of this paper that were not approved for publication by Retraction Watch, despite their direct relevance to the topic at hand. It is possible that personal and/or professional animosity between the author and the CSI leadership (see stated conflicts of interest (COIs)) may have a role to play, but this does not remove the fact that the author's first amendment rights have been forcefully truncated, and violated, by Retraction Watch. Have other academics experienced a similar situation?

A

Why was my comment not approved?

We are huge fans of Retraction Watch commenters. They broaden our posts, send us tips, and correct us when we get things wrong. Without them, the site would be a shadow of itself. However, we have recently found ourselves having to edit ad hominem attacks out of comments, unapprove other comments, and contact some commenters to remind them of what's appropriate.

It may not be clear to those who feel the need to resort to such personal attacks that they destroy the discourse that we and others have worked so hard to build on Retraction Watch, but it is abundantly clear to us and many others. The same goes for unfounded allegations and unverified facts.

We will not tolerate these sorts of attacks, allegations, and unverified facts — a category that includes speculation, whether about what might have happened, or about the mindset of the people involved. We will not edit comments, and will not approve any that contain material that violates this policy, even if it is a small part of a larger comment. While that means useful information may not be posted if it is included in a comment that violates these guidelines, users are welcome to rewrite comments so that they conform to our policy. They are also welcome to contact us — using the email addresses provided in our About pages — to ask why a given comment was not approved. If instead they choose to leave a comment asking why another was not approved, we may respond, time permitting, provided that they used a working email address.

B



Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva March 15, 2016 at 11:38 pm

I would like to make three suggestions because it takes time to research, discover and report retractions that RW has not yet covered, or is not yet aware of. Time that commentators spend will be time that RW saves, so there needs to be a compensation, not monetarily, but in terms of recognition and official thanks.

The first suggestion is that RW should at least add a hat tip, even to anonymous contributors. Otherwise it looks as if RW takes all the credit for these discoveries. The entries already made above should thus also be updated to reflect the identity of the person making the report. As a reader, I would like to know who make those reports. If commentators do not want to be thanked, then they should have this choice, but this fact should also be officially indicated.

The second suggestion I would like to make is to add a date when the report was made.

Finally, I suggest organizing the list into some visible structure, for example an alphabetic list of topics, otherwise it becomes simply a meaningless list for the public, but only a free and useful real-time alert system for RW and its staff. If the list is small, the public can scan it for possibly interesting or useful entries, but what happens if the list has 100 or 1000 entries? It becomes impossible to navigate, so there needs to be a somewhat strict structure, e.g. Agriculture, Cancer, Ecology, Hydrology, Plants, Zoology, etc.

I know that I would be able to make a significant contribution, but I would probably only be interested if my efforts were at least recognized officially by RW. The community can be useful in this exercise, but the issue of recognition and organization should be addressed first.

Comment awaiting moderation.

C



Anonymous March 15, 2016 at 11:56 pm

This paper has been retracted, but the fact that it is a retracted paper is not immediately clear when one observes the web-site, only when one opens the PDF file. There is no formal retraction notice and there is no formal explanation why the paper was retracted. Cambridge University Press is a COPE member, but these do not seem to be COPE-compliant retraction measures.

Comment awaiting moderation.

D



Jesus Verde March 22, 2016 at 2:05 pm

This researcher submitted a manuscript to my journal exactly one year ago, listing 10 co-authors. When I asked him to provide email addresses for the co-authors, he gave me 10 email addresses comprised of variations on his name at yahoo or gmail. I told him this was fishy and asked for their institutional emails. I haven't heard back.

Link Quote

Reply

Hide the reply to **Jesus Verde's** comment



Anonymous March 22, 2016 at 2:27 pm

Jesus Verde, when I Googled "Jesus Verde editor board", nothing came up. What journal are you referring to?

Comment awaiting moderation.

E



Anonymous November 7, 2016 at 8:33 pm

Full unedited text still available here:

<http://imsear.li.mahidol.ac.th/bitstream/123456789/141067/1/ijdv12012v78n2p229-5.pdf>

Comment awaiting moderation.

F



Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva November 11, 2016 at 11:20 am

This paper may be of interest to some:

Teixeira da Silva, J.A., Bornemann-Ciment, H. (2016) Why do some retracted papers continue to be cited? *Scientometrics*

<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11192-016-2178-9>

DOI: 10.1007/s11192-016-2178-9

Comment awaiting moderation.

Fig. 1. Five randomly selected comments

Notes: Fig. 1 Evidence of five randomly selected comments made between March and November of 2016 that are directly relevant to the topic being discussed, or potentially useful to the public and readers. These comments, which seem to be academically valid, respectful and tone-sensitive, were not approved by Retraction Watch, without any explanation, reasoning, or justification. This action by Retraction Watch appears to be in violation of, or inconsistent with, its own written and established commenting policies (A). The lack of approval of these comments constitutes a violation of freedom of speech, in direct violation of the United States First Amendment Rights, which apply to Retraction Watch, whose parent organization, the Center for Scientific Integrity Inc. (CSI), is based in New York. All comments were made by the author and are only visible to the commentator but invisible to the public, except for approved and published comments. Some comments were made anonymously (C, D, E), whereas others were made by name, i.e., signed (B, F). Red arrows indicate the unapproved (awaiting moderation) status. Even though the author suspects that comments were not approved, possibly because of potential conflicts of interest, such conflicts are not a stated reason for not having comments approved (see A). Relevance of comments to Retraction Watch posts: Retraction Watch specifically asks, in the title of this post "Want to help us report?", but then does not approve some reasonable suggestions made about how academics could assist and support Retraction Watch, while receiving correct and due recognition for their efforts (B); the website of this

Cambridge University Press (CUP) journal's retraction does not indicate to the public that this paper has been retracted, and which was highlighted by Retraction Watch, and which is not a COPE policy for retractions, even though CUP is a COPE member, a fact that my comment indicated (C); a commentator claiming to be "Jesus Verde" making independently unverifiable claims in the comment section could not be traced on Google or on major publishers' data-bases (D); the fact that this paper was retracted for privacy concerns, but the fact that a Google search reveals that a Thai university still had an uploaded, publicly available copy in PDF format seems to be a very important issue relevant to the readers, journal and publisher (E); this blog post involves an interview with Elizabeth Wager about the citation of retracted papers, and the comment posted was to direct readers to a paper I had just published precisely on this topic, and that I felt would be of direct use and relevance to the discussion. Incidentally, Elizabeth Wager is a former COPE Chair (2009-2012) and a co-Director of Retraction Watch's parent organization, the CSI.* Retraction Watch readers and the public can only assume, and expect, that comment moderation policies, and violations, are also the responsibility of the CSI Board of Directors.

Sources and URLs: <http://retractionwatch.com/the-retraction-watch-faq/> (A); <http://retractionwatch.com/2016/03/15/heres-a-sneak-peek-at-what-were-working-on/#comment-988749> (B); <http://retractionwatch.com/2016/03/15/another-paper-by-gm-researcher-pulled-over-manipulation-concerns/#comment-988757> (C); <http://retractionwatch.com/2016/03/21/environmental-journal-pulls-two-papers-for-compromised-peer-review/#comment-994049> (D); <http://retractionwatch.com/2016/11/07/family-decries-publication-of-childs-picture-in-open-access-journal/#comment-1174112> (E); <http://retractionwatch.com/2016/11/01/what-should-you-do-if-a-paper-youve-cited-is-later-retracted/#comment-1177999> (F).

Dates of screenshots: September 16, 2017 (A); March 15, 2016 (B); March 15, 2016 (C); March 22, 2016 (D); November 7, 2016 (E); November 11, 2016 (F).

Why is this issue so central to this paper? Most of the argument about why science or academia is in a state of crisis relates to the lack of transparency and openness, often a result of the inability to hold an open dialogue, or the opacity displayed by one or more parties. Thus, the inability of academics to express clear, relevant and respectful opinions about topics that are relevant to other academics in the comment section of the Retraction Watch blog, which was created precisely for this purpose, is of great concern. An excuse offered by Oransky is that staff is short on time and resources for comment verification and moderation, despite the massive pool of funding. However, comment moderation is apparently controlled exclusively by Oransky himself. One result of excessive comment moderation is a chilling effect on freedom of speech, i.e., the inability to express ideas related to the blog posts and engage in fruitful and passionate debate on topics of importance to academics on the same platform, i.e., academics would then have to establish their own platforms, blogs, etc. to express their views, diluting or decentralizing the conversation. Another fairly obvious reason for reducing the freedom of speech of readers through limited commenting is to limit criticisms about Retraction Watch, its reporting, the CSI, its directors, or its funders. Avoiding criticism reduces the risk of litigation and negative publicity that is associated with the culture of public shaming being employed by Retraction Watch.

Profiling by the science watchdogs Retraction Watch and PubPeer

To a sector of academics, editors or publishers that are profiled by Retraction Watch, a negative image and impression is created of that individual or organization being profiled, simply by being associated with that blog. This is because profiling at Retraction Watch is also an act of public shaming, which was denounced by Susan Fiske, the former President of the American Psychological Society (Fiske, 2016), and even by the former Chair of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), Virginia Barbour, ironically at Retraction Watch[†]. Despite the informative nature of many Retraction Watch reports, the association of most scientists whose errors or retractions are profiled at Retraction Watch automatically creates a negative image of them, except on rare

* <http://retractionwatch.com/the-center-for-scientific-integrity/board-of-directors/>

[†] <http://retractionwatch.com/2017/03/23/agreed-listen-complaint-paper-harassment-began/> ("Vilifying authors or editors with public humiliation – driven often by a crowd mentality – seems to be what some in this arena want. As one tweeter said (hopefully ironically)– a "public lashing" may even be expected. We strongly refute this way of thinking. With such a climate it is hard to see how we could ever develop a culture of no blame correction, which is a prerequisite for a reliable published record.")

occasions, for example, in the “doing the right thing” category*. The creation of this category by Retraction Watch implies that those who do not appear on this list are not doing the right thing. In many cases, co-authors of the targets of profiling at Retraction Watch may be innocent bystanders, for example co-authors of multi-author papers, as even exemplified by Retraction Watch†, or editors associated with a journal profiled by Retraction Watch, but who have been negatively labeled, directly or indirectly, by this culture of collective profiling and public shaming, i.e., guilt by association. Googling the name of academics who have been profiled by Retraction Watch shows that their names appear listed higher than positive aspects of that person or their career, most likely because of the powerful search optimization ability of WordPress – the platform used by Retraction Watch to host its blog – to be trawled by Google spiders or “bots”‡. So, a powerful structure has been set up in which public shaming can be easily achieved, having a potentially disastrous effect on a scientist’s reputation and career, even within a short space of time, and even if the Retraction Watch blog post describing their academic predicament may have been shallow, or biased (i.e., imbalanced). One blog describes Retraction Watch as “toxic scientific journalism”§, but the true identity of that blogger is unclear, as are his/her potential COIs. Curiously, during submission of this paper to Springer Nature’s *Journal of Academic Ethics*, which subsequently rejected the paper, peer reviewer 2 had the following to say about Retraction Watch: “Authors deserve kudos for their timely write-up on this draconian handling of so-called ‘retractions’ by laymen who do not understand the deeper workings of the scientific process”, “The researcher community is vulnerable and lacks the political and economic clout to tackle these self-appointed governors of science”, and “Hopefully, articles like these stimulate the scientists to fight together and take a united stance against high handedness of the pseudojournalists.”

This new-found boom-to-bust property of science and academia (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2016) became prominent in 2014-2016 with the rise of Retraction Watch and PubPeer**, the latter being an equally potent post-publication peer review site/blog and science watchdog (Teixeira da Silva, 2016a). Retraction Watch used to apply a draconian pressure-induced 24-hour deadline to respond to queries, leaving the “accused” (aka interviewed) academic or entity little time to reflect, and formulate a carefully balanced opinion and response to the accusations being leveled at them. This policy appears to have changed in recent times, but readers of Retraction Watch are not privy to a full or balanced background to each published blog post. This pressure-induced form of shaming click-bait-based journalism fortifies the risks of placing blind trust in the hands of journalists who then assume the self-appointed role as science watchdogs and then assume that, based on social media popularity, that they are automatically ethicists of sorts.

Has Retraction Watch twisted the rights to freedom of speech by strictly controlling, i.e., exceeding moderation? Public shaming – the core operating principle behind Retraction Watch (Oransky, Marcus, 2016) – by a science-smear blog that purportedly claims to seek academic righteousness through increased transparency and accountability, is currently operating on a basis of unfair and/or biased comment moderation, reducing the opportunity by those being profiled to respond freely to accusations being made, to offer a public defense, or to offer their views on the issue, i.e., the science journalism offered by Retraction Watch is manipulative. So, despite its informative nature, Retraction Watch appears to be violating at least two basic ethical principles of journalism, namely fairness and impartiality††. The excuse used by Retraction Watch that there is insufficient funding or human resources thus no longer applies. Either that, or funding by the philanthropic organizations has been grossly mismanaged. How then do academia and the public hold Retraction Watch accountable for comments that have been unfairly unapproved, excessively moderated, or manipulated, especially when the public is unaware that this is taking place? There is one upside to stricter moderation, namely that vigilantes (Blatt, 2015; Teixeira da Silva, 2016b),

* <http://retractionwatch.com/category/by-reason-for-retraction/doing-the-right-thing/>

† <http://retractionwatch.com/2018/01/11/devastated-researchers-worry-co-authors-use-fake-reviews-hurt-careers/>

‡ https://codex.wordpress.org/Search_Engine_Optimization_for_WordPress

§ <https://sciencetransactions.wordpress.com/2014/12/13/retraction-watch-toxic-scientific-journalism-for-the-wild-web/>

** <https://www.pubpeer.com/>

†† <http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/who-we-are/5-principles-of-journalism>

or more radical and impassioned comments, are largely left out of the blog's discussion board, and these tend to be ventilated elsewhere such as on other blogs, social media such as Twitter, or PubPeer, although the latter has also adopted a stricter comment moderation policy, most likely also as a result of having received funding from the LJAF for 2016-2019*. This link between Retraction Watch and PubPeer†, which also constitutes a blatant financial COI, is rarely publicly or openly acknowledged by either organization.

Authors' rights in increasingly militarized academia

What rights do authors and academics have in a system that is increasingly becoming more militarized (i.e., draconian) (Teixeira da Silva, 2016c), and whose freedoms and rights are being increasingly curtailed (Al-Khatib, Teixeira da Silva, 2017)? Even ethical charters that were created to offer protections to authors, such as COPE, cut academics out of the conversation by not considering their grievances related to COPE member journals or publishers (Teixeira da Silva, 2017a). An argument that Retraction Watch and its supporters and allies, including Brandon Stell, PubPeer's co-founder‡, use is that publicly funded research belongs to the public and that, as a result, academics who receive such funding are at the public's mercy. Thus, if they are not willing to be publicly scrutinized or respond publicly to criticisms, then they should not publish in the first place (Oransky, Marcus, 2016). However, why should academics have to answer to Retraction Watch or PubPeer, i.e., what morally or ethically superior standing do these organizations, or their leadership, have that give them the right to demand responses from academics, editors or publishers, and do these entities that they profile not have the right to silence?

Public profiling and screening of academia is now rife on these sites, including on the Leonid Schneider blog "for better science"§, and the Retraction Watch retraction database** provides a potentially discriminative platform. For example, co-authors of a paper in which one author may have been singled out for misconduct, or error, will all automatically be labelled with the same category, by mere association, i.e., collective shaming. One example, Carlo M. Croce of Ohio State University, who in 2017 was ranked 19th on the Google *h*-index list†† – even higher than Albert Einstein who was ranked at 1491st position – and who sued the New York Times for defamation‡‡, has multiple papers – currently 24 – listed on this Retraction Watch retraction database, which also includes, despite not being retractions, corrections and expressions of concern. Academics are apparently not yet questioning why the latter two categories of errata are being archived by Retraction Watch on its "retraction" database, and what image is being projected of co-authors – in some cases more than a dozen in Croce's papers – who may have absolutely nothing to do with the issues plaguing such papers. Retraction Watch's counter-argument might be that one of the responsibilities of all co-authors of a paper is "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"§§, and thus shaming of one author is applicable to all co-authors, who share collective responsibility for the published work. How does a researcher like Croce – or co-authors associated with this public shaming – deal with profiles created for and about them by Retraction Watch*** and PubPeer†††? This issue merits urgent discussion since the number of authors profiled by Retraction Watch rose sharply from 31 in April, 2015 to 764 on September 11, 2017 (Figure 2), i.e., public profiling and shaming is intensifying. Both Retraction Watch and PubPeer are vociferously trying to promote this new culture in academia, with solid

* <http://www.arnoldfoundation.org/grants/> (listed under "Research Integrity")

† <http://retractionwatch.com/category/by-journal/pubpeer-selections/>

‡ http://www.biomedicale.parisdescartes.fr/physiocer/?page_id=2983

§ <https://forbetterscience.com/>

** <http://retractiondatabase.org/RetractionSearch.aspx>

†† <http://www.webometrics.info/en/node/58>

‡‡ <http://retractionwatch.com/2017/09/08/carlo-croce-ohio-state-researcher-facing-misconduct-allegations-suing-new-york-times-defamation/>

§§ <http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html>

*** <http://retractionwatch.com/category/by-author/>

††† <https://www.pubpeer.com/search?q=Croce> (readers are cautioned that other academics with the surname "Croce" may also be listed, and not only Carlo M. Croce)

financial support by philanthropic organizations such as the LJAF, among others.

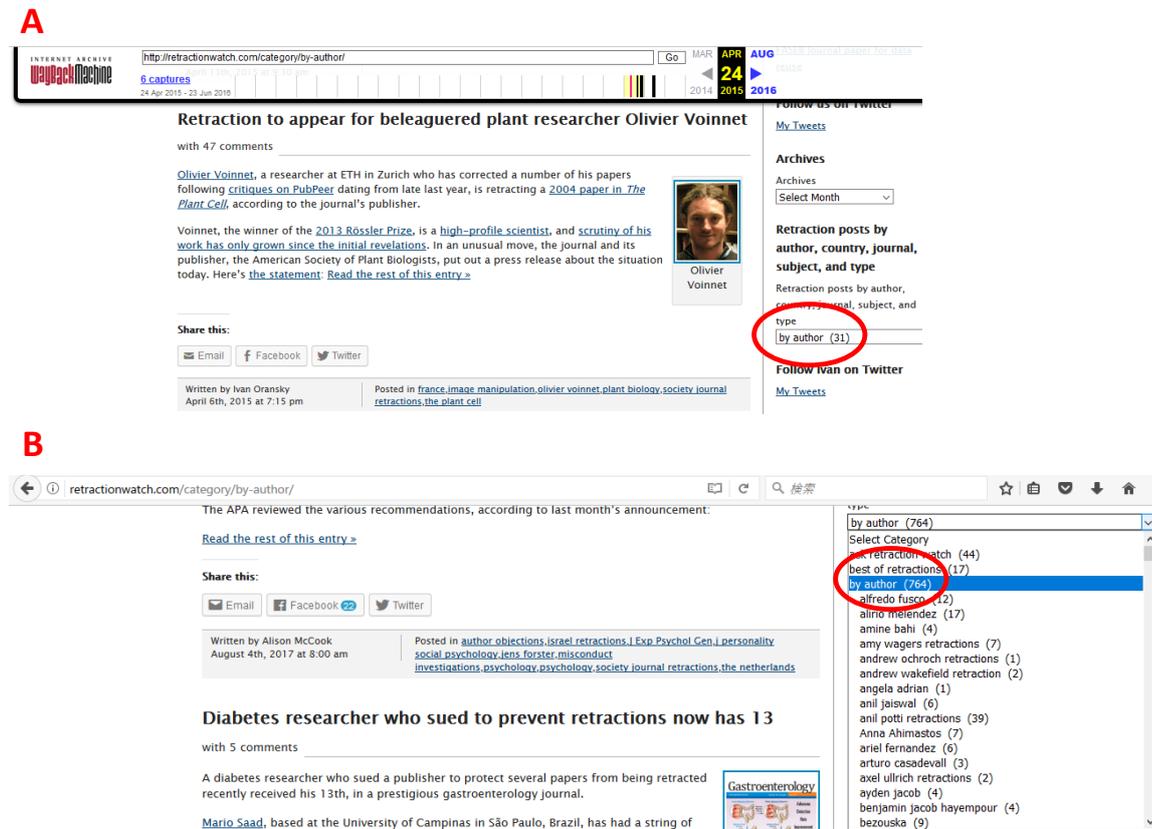


Fig. 2. Number of profiled and shamed authors

Notes: Fig. 2 In just two years, at Retraction Watch, a science-shaming science watchdog blog, the number of profiled and mostly shamed authors, indicated by red ovals, has risen exponentially from 31 in April of 2015 to 764 in September of 2017. Sources and URLs: [https://web.archive.org/web/20150424174050/http://retractionwatch.com/category/by-author/\(A\);](https://web.archive.org/web/20150424174050/http://retractionwatch.com/category/by-author/(A);) [http://retractionwatch.com/category/by-author/\(B\)](http://retractionwatch.com/category/by-author/(B)). Date of screenshots: September 11, 2017 (A, B).

The greater danger of this mission is that it is also being projected as an “open science” or “open data” quest, such that public profiling and shaming are becoming equated with openness and transparency. This is reinforced by the fact that the Retraction Watch database was developed and built by the Center for Open Science (COS)*, headed by Brian Nosek, a partnership that began in late 2015†. COS also receives funding from the LJAF, approximately US\$ 17.6 million from 2013-2019‡ (Figure 3).

Correction of errors is under intense scrutiny and pressure

In the scientific literature, errors should no doubt be corrected, but through what channels should this take place, and following what procedures? Should academics consider Retraction Watch and PubPeer to be valid keepers of the integrity of the published literature, and who would be responsible for conferring such a privileged status to these organizations? An argument made by Blatt (2015) is that a pitchfork culture, or a discussion based on coercion, as is espoused by

* <https://cos.io/>

† <https://cos.io/about/news/center-open-science-and-center-scientific-integrity-announce-partnership/>

‡ <http://www.arnoldfoundation.org/grants/>

A	Center for Open Science, Inc.	2013 - 2015	\$204,729	↓
	Center for Open Science, Inc.	2013 - 2017	\$5,250,000	↓
	Center for Open Science, Inc.	2013 - 2017	\$250,000	↓
	Center for Open Science, Inc.	2013 - 2017	\$1,926,750	↓
	Center for Open Science, Inc.	2014 - 2017	\$528,500	↓
	Center for Open Science, Inc.	2014 - 2017	\$589,690	↓
	Center for Open Science, Inc.	2015 - 2016	\$77,952	↓
	Center for Open Science, Inc.	2015 - 2018	\$77,310	↓
	Center for Open Science, Inc.	2015 - 2019	\$1,225,000	↓
	Center for Open Science, Inc.	2016 - 2018	\$7,500,000	↓
B	The Center for Scientific Integrity, Inc.	2015 - 2017	\$300,000	↑
To support the expansion of Retraction Watch, an online website and database that promotes transparency and integrity in scientific research.				
C	The PubPeer Foundation	2016 - 2019	\$412,800	↑
To provide general operating support.				

Fig. 3. Funding sources to Retraction Watch and PubPeer

Notes: Fig. 3 The Laura and John Arnold Foundation (LJAF), which also finances Retraction Watch and PubPeer, including their shaming policies, has also injected approximately US\$ 17.6 million into the Nosek-headed Center for Open Science from 2013-2019 (A), thereby solidifying the notion that open science cannot progress without public shaming. Retraction Watch's CSI (The Center for Scientific Integrity, Inc.) and The PubPeer Foundation received US\$ 300,000 (B) and US\$ 412,000 (C), respectively from the LJAF. Source: <http://www.arnoldfoundation.org/grants/> (under "Research Integrity")

Oransky and Marcus* (Teixeira da Silva, 2017b), is not conducive to offering a fair and/or balanced discussion, especially if one party wears an anonymous mask. This is because one side prods without scrutiny while the scrutinized party is prodded without fair recourse to defense, or is not offered an opportunity of defense under the biased moderation policies in place at Retraction Watch and PubPeer. A classic case that shows the legal (defamatory) risk of anonymous critique of the published literature is of Paul S. Brookes[†] of the University of Rochester Medical Center, who was ousted as the mastermind behind science-fraud.org[‡], a site that was forced to shut down by legal threats, and where Brookes often blatantly associated errors made by scientists with fraud (Pain, 2014). Pro-Retraction Watch and -PubPeer proponents such as Brookes (Brookes, 2014) will likely counter-argue that the identity of the commentator is not important, to evade responsibility for them, and that factually accurate statements, even if they cast the individual or organization

* <https://www.statnews.com/2017/04/06/research-parasite-award-data-analysis/> ("We agree that collaboration is better than coercion. But that's the whole point: We need coercion precisely because so many scientists are loath to collaborate on any terms other than their own, if at all.")

[†] <http://www.psblab.org/>; <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/people/23781238=researchers>

[‡] <http://www.science-fraud.org/>; partially archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20170719031229/http://www.science-fraud.org/>

being profiled in a negative light, cannot be considered to be accusatory, or defamatory, even if they are shamed. This is largely the argument that Leonid Schneider offers, despite appealing two court decisions that provisionally found him guilty of libel, a decision that he is challenging*.

However, do those who have been profiled on these platforms feel the same way? Thus, sites like Retraction Watch and PubPeer may be serving as accusatory platforms that attempt to force the hand of academics, editors or publishers to offer an explanation and thus force errata, corrections, or retractions. And in some cases, such actions may have irreparable consequences for authors and the publisher†. Does forceful or pressured public pressure that results from public profiling and shaming, in order to extract a response, or that results in a retraction, constitute duress‡? If so, is this in the true academic spirit of correcting the scientific literature (Teixeira da Silva, 2016d)? Such corrections and retractions, which are increasingly emerging as a result of whistle-blowing taking place at PubPeer, then feed into the Retraction Watch blog, and then archived in the COS-supported retraction database thus serving as a powerful link between these three organizations, the CSI, the PubPeer Foundation and COS, with communal LJAF funding. The issue of anonymous whistle-blowing, as part of the post-publication peer review and academic integrity, has been poorly debated, and little published literature exists on this topic.

The shaming factor behind hidden masks

Being profiled at or by Retraction Watch and PubPeer is an act of shaming because faults, errors, or retractions – all negative aspects, but several of which may be made in genuine error – are pointed out with limited background context, and without pointing out any positive aspects of the individuals or organizations being profiled, i.e., they are unbalanced. Therefore, readers of any blog post at Retraction Watch or entry at PubPeer are mostly left with a negative and skewed impression of the individual or organization being profiled. The fact that comments are unfairly moderated, or not published at all, as exemplified in Figure 1, fortifies the notion that recourse to a fair, open and transparent rebuttal (i.e., a possible kangaroo court§ where the accused is “guilty” by mere association and listing in a crude and unfair mass trial) is not always possible on these platforms. Discussion is thus truncated and controlled at Retraction Watch while the identity of the PubPeer moderator remains unknown, with cryptic clues left as to his/her identity via Twitter**. Those in defense of Retraction Watch may say that this is simply a sensationalist facet of journalism, and that shaming and critical analysis would go hand in hand in post-publication peer review (Galbraith, 2015). However, it is likely that those who have been profiled at or by PubPeer or Retraction Watch would offer a very different perspective. In extreme cases such as data fabrication or outright fraud, when proved after a thorough institutional investigation, public shaming could in fact have a useful effect, and maybe serve as a deterrent. In such a system, the message would be that if you cheat, you may be publicly profiled and shamed.

Retraction Watch and PubPeer appear to offer special and exceptional support and protection to pseudonymous (Teixeira da Silva, 2017c) and anonymous critics such as *Clare Francis*††, *fernandopessoa*, *Neuroskeptic*, *Smut Clyde* and/or *herr doktor bimler*, who may themselves have hidden agendas and COIs, and who may or may not be the same individuals, i.e., sock-puppetry. However, since their true identities are masked, it would be impossible to make a fair and balanced assessment whether their critiques on these sites is fair and free of COIs. On these sites, since parties are first shamed, and then only given an opportunity to rebut the claims made, if at all, the presumption of innocence until proved guilty is annulled, i.e., there is an almost automatic presumption of guilt by association. So, as an example, if there is an error as a duplicated figure, incorrectly attributed text (possibly plagiarism) that is profiled at or by Retraction Watch and/or PubPeer, it immediately creates an automatic association with

* <https://twitter.com/schneiderleonid/status/949994610734051329>

† <http://info.cmsri.org/blog/has-snoyes-been-snoyed-will-retraction-watch-retract>

‡ <http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Duress> (defined as “Unlawful pressure exerted upon a person to coerce that person to perform an act that he or she ordinarily would not perform”)

§ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kangaroo_court

** <https://twitter.com/PubPeer/status/853005531572834304>;

<https://twitter.com/PubPeer/status/852949240892588034> (as two examples)

†† [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clare_Francis_\(science_critic\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clare_Francis_(science_critic))

misconduct, or guilt because that is what these sites have come to symbolize. This negative association may result in automatic reputational damage. Are Retraction Watch and PubPeer in fact about correcting the literature or are they about shaming academics, editors and publishers as the core modus operandus to correct the literature? The notion that there is an almost automatic association between errors and fraud was fortified in an interview given to the Canadian media, Quebec Science, in which Oransky was described as a some sort of a superhero tracking “illegal” (i.e., fraudulent) scientists*.

Philanthropy and ethics in the mix

So, if Retraction Watch and PubPeer moderate out valid academic comments (e.g., Figure 1), share communal and substantial funding from at least one philanthropic organization without transparently indicating precisely how this funding is being used, and leave academics’ reputations stained even before they have had an opportunity to respond, then what is the correct procedure to deal with these issues? Formal bodies that should investigate claims of misconduct or oversee the effectiveness of the process related to possible errors or claims of misconduct are inconsistently failing their responsibilities, such as COPE (Teixeira da Silva, 2017a) and COPE member editors or journals, despite new punitive measures for non-compliant COPE members[†], leading Retraction Watch, PubPeer and other science watchdogs to take a more critical and liberal stand. A possible argument, which is valid, could be that they are filling in a gap of the need for science watchdogs which currently does not exist. Thus, authors are in many ways the victims of a dysfunctional system that failed quality control at many levels during traditional peer review, but are now also victims of a new culture of public shaming. Is there a middle ground to this situation and how can Retraction Watch and PubPeer be held more accountable? If academics stay silent, they may be accused of avoiding to deal with the issues presented publicly, even by masked individuals, but if they respond, their actions and even words may be used against them, i.e., to shame them (e.g., Oransky, Marcus, 2016). To avoid a fallout and become another boom-to-bust case, academics may seek to do the right thing, and issue errata, corrigenda or retractions. Such a process should be a simple, straightforward and natural part of publishing, and should not be associated with shame. However, by introducing the shaming factor, possibly with a punitive objective, as occurs in many cases at Retraction Watch and PubPeer, the process is neither fair nor balanced, and may have negative scarring psychological effects (Pinto-Gouveia et al., 2014). Post-publication peer review, as a natural part of the publishing process, has only truly begun to be recognized as a natural need of publishing in the past few years (Teixeira da Silva, 2015). So, it is likely that this initial phase of transition will incur victims and clashes, some of them physically aggressive (Oransky, 2014a), some of them tragic (Oransky, 2014b), and some of them legal challenges, such as to Retraction Watch (e.g., Marcus, 2013) and PubPeer (Teixeira da Silva, 2018).

Perception and pressure are important aspects of the Retraction Watch and PubPeer mission to achieve “success”. These organizations have tapped into unique unexplored niches and have received considerable philanthropic funding as a result. However, with money comes increased responsibility and the need to be fully transparent, allowing the public and academia to be critical of these organizations. In Doshi (2015), Oransky is on record stating that “transparency is vital”, silence is part of the “typical scientific playbook”, and “[i]t has certainly been our experience that journals and researchers and institutions can be incredibly stubborn about failing to retract a paper, about ignoring calls, or not responding favourably to calls to retract.” However, if placed under pressure, if freedom of speech is only partially allowed, and if the outcome of an interview (e.g., by email) may result in public shaming or profiling, which academic would want to speak out at or against Retraction Watch and PubPeer? An extreme case of this new culture of shaming and public castigation takes the form of the Retraction Watch leaderboard[‡].

Conclusions

The fields of publishing ethics and reform are in a highly volatile and fluid state at present. The current publishing platforms are imperfect, and many as-yet undisclosed and undiscovered

* <http://www.quebecscience.qc.ca/actualites/homme-qui-traque-les-scientifiques-hors-la-loi>

† <http://retractionwatch.com/2017/12/19/official-journals-behave-badly-punishment/>

‡ <http://retractionwatch.com/the-retraction-watch-leaderboard/>

errors and faults likely exist. Sites such as Retraction Watch and PubPeer have identified these weaknesses, and have explored them to raise awareness and expand the discussion. In general, this is a good thing. However, the manner in which they operate does not encourage the majority of academics to want to engage voluntarily or to correct faulty literature because they may be publicly profiled and shamed, because what they do or say tends to be used against them, and because association with these sites is almost an automatic association with misconduct or guilt. Editors or publishers* who feel constantly negatively profiled by Retraction Watch and PubPeer might not perceive these organizations to be a positive and constructive force in academia's reform, despite their rapid rise to the status of "ethicists" or publishing "specialists", as exemplified by the presence of the Retraction Watch and PubPeer leadership in many ethics and related meetings, such as the 2017 5th World Conference on Research Integrity[†]. As these organizations gain traction and begin to become part of ethics and publishing policy-making, seeking political power and gains through government-based recognition, for example serving as "expert witnesses" of scientific integrity[‡], academics need to assess them critically and place pressure when aspects of these platforms may appear to be infringing upon authors' rights. Initially starting as hobbies, Retraction Watch and PubPeer have become registered companies with a charitable status, attracting sizeable funding, so the issue of a financial COI will now always exist. Academics must learn to be able to hold these organizations in check as they gain increased status, power of policy making, and influence.

Disclaimer and conflicts of interest

The author is not associated with any academic institute, blog or web-site. The author was profiled by Retraction Watch and PubPeer. The author has been banned from commenting on the Leonid Schneider blog and on PubPeer, as a signed commentator in the latter case. In the case of Retraction Watch, no comments have been approved for publication in 2017, suggesting that the author has also been banned from commenting at Retraction Watch.

Abbreviations: COI, conflict of interest; COPE, Committee on Publication Ethics; COS, Center for Open Science; CSI, The Center for Science Integrity Inc.; LJAF, Laura and John Arnold Foundation.

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* <http://retractionwatch.com/category/by-publisher/> (top two publishers profiled by Retraction Watch: Elsevier = 598 entries; Springer Nature = 334 entries; data accurate on September 16, 2017)

† <http://wcri2017.org/07fa5bb9f2b74830a7c18326c32538d5?platform=hootsuite> (Ivan Oransky and Boris Barbour represented)

‡ <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/science-and-technology-committee/research-integrity/written/48704.html>

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