

Manuscript Quality, Authorship Fraud, and Other Issues

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Abstract

Unlike in the case of verbal communication, prior to submitting a written work for publication authors have the opportunity to edit and revise it multiple times. They can revisit it again and again in order to enhance its content and polish its language. Once they submit their ‘final’ draft to a journal, editors and reviewers evaluate and assess its merit and suitability. If a manuscript is accepted, they help further revise, refine, and make it ready for production. In addition to this editorial concern for the quality of research, in this essay I shall explore the questions of authorship, authorship fraud, and other related concerns. The discussion here is primarily driven to stress the importance of maintaining ethical standards in publishing, especially those related to authorship credit.

Keywords

Spoken words, written words, authorship credit, authorship fraud, free riding, publication integrity

Introduction: Spoken and written words

In the field of language and literature, as in many other disciplines, we academics largely deal in and with words. We speak words during instructional contact hours with students and explain to them human conditions – real or fictional – expressed in words and other symbols. We publish words that then help us meet the pressing demand to build academic credentials. Thus, we use both spoken and written words for learning as well as for knowledge creation and dissemination purposes.

There are differences between spoken and written words. The former exist within a situation and are generally accompanied by intonation and non-verbal cues such as “willing or unwilling gestures, facial expressions, and so on” (Dutta 7). In in-person, face-to-face settings, spoken words are often relevant to a visible environment and, if not pre-recorded, take place in the presence of both the speaker and the audience. In such sessions, the speaker remains conscious of the presence of the audience which may help or impede the former’s ability to

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articulate their ideas and experiences. If slipups occur or controversies arise while delivering spoken words and if the speaker becomes aware of them instantly, they have the opportunity to rectify or address them during in-person or (synchronous) virtual live sessions. In that sense, speakers have an edge over the writer even though stage fright can have a negative impact on their performance.

Once a written work is published, the writer has no control over it whatsoever. Readers depend completely on the written text to comprehend what it means or is all about. They cannot benefit from the presence of the writer or from their vocal intonations and physical gestures. Readers generally do not go to writers to seek explanation or clarification if what the latter intend to convey through their words is unclear to the former. Any such possibility is eliminated in the case of readers consulting a work whose author is no longer around. Deceased authors exercise no control over how readers consume or appreciate the content they produced. As the Anglo-American poet WH Auden said in his elegy on the death of the Irish poet and Nobel laureate WB Yeats (1865-1939):

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living. (“In Memory of WB
Yeats”)

Perhaps we all recognise that the words of writers are subject to appropriation and to an extraordinary variety of interpretations, commentaries, and criticisms. Their reception and interpretation can be as diverse as the contexts within which they are read. Readers make semantic judgements on the basis of the words that writers write. They depend on the written words to understand the meaning of various topics or to follow the twists and turns of a story that the writer wants to convey to them.

Content quality and publication integrity

For the above and many other reasons, one should take advantage of the nature of written work and be extremely careful about what they write and publish. Once their words are published and disseminated to a wider audience, writers cannot command the way in which they will be received, understood, interpreted, or even misinterpreted. That writers did not have time and hence could not do justice to their work is not accepted as a valid excuse or a good justification for failure to produce quality materials.

Here comes the role of editors and reviewers who are sometimes called “knowledge guides” or “gatekeepers of knowledge.” They provide authors with guidance on the development of manuscripts under consideration and then help prepare them for publication. Editors aid authors by evaluating their manuscripts

and by guiding them on how to revise their work into publishable form. As readers are the ultimate consumers in the publishing industry, editors indirectly benefit them by assisting authors to improve their works and present them to readers in an understandable manner.

Given the critical role that editors play in selecting, evaluating, and preparing a manuscript for publication, there is an assumption that “if there is no gatekeeping involved when producing and publishing [a] work, the published work will not become legitimate in the literary world” (Fürst 493). The peer review and editorial process are meant to improve the quality and presentation of research work. They subject submitted manuscripts to scrutiny and objective assessment in order to determine their suitability for publication. Editorial comments and guidance during manuscript preparation help ensure factual accuracy, stylistic flair, and the appropriateness of their presentation style.

In addition to ensuring the quality of published works that eventually become part of the corpus of (scientific) knowledge, editors also have the ethical responsibility of preventing – when possible – undue authorship credits of research papers. In the academic world, we rightfully raise eyebrows about the offences of plagiarism and data fabrication/falsification. But it should not be forgotten that unwarranted authorship inclusion and exclusion and “the abuse and manipulation of an author list” (Borenstein and Shamoo 277) are some of the disturbing practices and troubling trends in publication activity. These misconducts should be condemned in the same way and with the same vehemence. If not checked and stopped, they may cripple the intellectual and moral development of individual academics and researchers, and seats of (higher) learning will succumb to the insidious virus of mediocrity. The following anecdote may help take stock of this academic misdemeanour in respect of editorial discretion.

Nearly ten authors!

Once a manuscript was submitted for publication in *Asiatic*. During the review process, as part of my editorial duty, I was communicating with the corresponding author and was not aware of the existence of any co-authors of the manuscript. It was recommended for publication after corrections. I gave the corresponding author the revision letter and the reviewer comments and suggestions in the body of the work. Once the revised manuscript arrived back on my desk, I noticed that it bore nearly ten names in the author list. The long list of co-authors raised a red flag for me, and I somehow realised that not all in the list of names under the title deserved the authorship of the paper in question. I declined to publish the piece. That incident is one reason why there is now a cap on the number of co-authors of papers published in *Asiatic*. We made the decision that the journal would not consider a multi-author paper for publication if its authorship were attributed to more than three people.

Long lists of authors, especially in the field of language and literature, often make us suspicious, as we are aware that there are people who form a clique with the understanding that one or few of them will write a paper and include the names of others in the author list. They rotate such writing tasks in order to inflate the publication records of all members of the clique and thus benefit from each other unethically. There are other ways in which people commit authorship fraud, and various terms are used to describe them.

There are academics who put their names as authors in a manuscript in which they are not intellectually involved at all or to which they have contributed minimally. This may happen with the consent of the actual author/s, as it is presumed that the inclusion of senior colleagues in the author list may bolster the credibility of a research work or smoothen its publication process. Or, in cases, authors are forced to include in the author list names who have not contributed to the conception and development of the article or whose contribution is not sufficient to claim authorship.

Free riding and authorship credit

Gift/guest/honorary authorship or authorship insertion/inclusion is generally labelled as free riding in publication parlance. According to Michael McBride, “Free-riders are individuals who want to receive the benefits of a jointly produced good without contributing to the production” (399). One worst form of free riding in academic publication happens when senior researchers insert their names in the works produced by their juniors or research students and thus gain undue authorship credits. Many academics seem to be lured into such authorship abuse which is also known as “publication parasitism” (Kwok 554). This academic misconduct persists because the actual authors allow this to happen by giving their consent to this willy-nilly collaborative corruption. I believe both parties are more or less equally guilty of getting a manuscript published without considering the ethical issues involved. This offence is comparable to cheating in examination halls, as I illustrate below.

When invigilating exams, I often remind my students not to look at someone else’s, and not to let other examinees look at their, answers. Such a check-and-balance rationale should be applied to publication practices across disciplinary fields. One academic’s behaviour affects that of their colleagues. One should not insert their name as an author in a paper if their contribution does not amount to authorship, and one should not allow their written work to be a site of authorship abuse.

Three reasons for shunning authorship fraud

Free riding or unwarranted authorship inclusion is ruinous to the fabric of academic life. A decent and honest academician shuns the practice of such authorship abuse for many good reasons. I mention three of them below.

First, academics who are involved in adding their names as authors in papers that they have not authored are not necessarily intellectually incapable. Many or most of them are holders of doctoral or other comparable degrees in their fields; they are often research participants, research grantees, or recipients of research training fellowships. To put it in a nutshell, they are pretty smart, intelligent people but are given to the greed of increasing their publication points unethically for promotion and/or recognition purposes. They are guilty of authorship manipulation and at fault for acting in an unprincipled way to wear the badge of writers of manuscripts they have not developed or written (in cases, have not even read). This dependence on others' writings for authorship credit and their refusal to do the research and writing themselves render their intellectual abilities and research skills dull and rusty. This self-defeating behaviour is a personal loss for them and a definite loss for their country that invested in facilitating their education and training.

Second, when a senior colleague inserts their name as an author in the manuscript of a junior colleague or a professor does so in the work of their research student and the work is published, their name will remain tied to the piece of writing whose quality may not be commensurate with their academic qualifications or standing. They take the responsibility of those multi-author works of whose content and material they are perhaps not fully aware. I have seen published papers co-authored by professors and their research students which are not representative of the academic stature of the former. On one occasion, having read the first few paragraphs of an inept article and come across a number of serious flaws within the span of those, I reached the conclusion that the professor in question did not even read the manuscript, let alone contribute to its preparation for publication.

The third reason why one should not be involved in the misdemeanour of authorship fraud by wrongly attributing a work to them is related to the question of ethics. If one receives a promotion in the professional hierarchy or an increase in salary by virtue of their spurious publication record, their earnings and other perks and privileges may not be considered lawful. What is more, those who believe in the afterlife have reasons to worry about the consequences of such practices beyond this mundane existence.

Conclusion: Requests to potential contributors

What I have written above is partly inspired by my editorial experience and is intended to make the following requests to potential contributors to *Asiatic*. If you are a corresponding author, before submitting a multi-author manuscript to the journal for publication, please consider carefully if all in the author list deserve authorship credit. The thrust of the argument of this essay is directed more to the co-author than to the main author, as it is built around the premise that one should not claim undue authorship. If one's contribution to an academic output

does not warrant authorship credit, they should not allow their name to be published as one of its authors.

Even if all mentioned in the author list have contributed to the writing of a manuscript and are deserving of authorship credit, their responsibilities with regard to the paper does not end upon its submission to a publisher. All authors should participate in the revision process, address reviewer comments, and read carefully the revised version before submitting it to the editor. Again, once the final draft is sent back to the authors for approval or confirmation, all authors must read and approve it before sending it back to the editor for publication. They must remember that they are collectively responsible for all aspects and parts of the published document, and they should be ready to own them.

Without the cooperation of authors, editors alone may not be able to eliminate the virus of authorship fraud. This editorial is a call for academics to raise their moral antennae and maintain integrity and ethical standards in producing and publishing research outputs. Intellectual honesty and ethical academic practices are the bedrock upon which the edifice of a nation's education is constructed, and this is inseparable from the holistic development of a community.

On a final note, the wider population looks up to academics as beacons of moral virtue and ethical rectitude. Therefore, we as academics must live up to these social expectations and protect ourselves from unethical behaviour in academic practices. It is also my hope that *Asiatic* will continue to uphold ethical standards in publishing. Another problematic issue in this debate is ghost writing or ghost authorship in which the actual writer does not obtain authorship credit. But that is a topic for another essay.

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