

Letter to Editor

Publishing papers tribally: a deviated branch of interdisciplinary research?

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Dear Editor,

Collaborating and exchanging ideas and expertise across different disciplines are of utmost need to tackle multifaceted technical or public problems. Many research funding agencies and foundations across the world are now promoting their programs with the goal of developing interdisciplinary research (Rylance, 2015; Van Noorden, 2015). Research in general is progressively becoming interdisciplinary, a trend that is strongly supported by governmental institutions as well (Porter and Rafols, 2009). Meanwhile, a deviated trend in interdisciplinary research is emerging in the form of multi-authored papers, with apparently insignificant or vague workload of some of the listed authors. According to a survey by Kozlov (2023), it was found that approximately 69% of research paper co-authors in Europe and about 55% in the United States admitted that they were listed without having the sufficient author criteria needed for a scientific paper. Similarly, we do have the problem of inappropriate authorship in our country, although no published research data is available.

While certain inappropriate co-authors may justifiably advance their own future scientific careers through such publications, however it is unacceptable if this procedure is transformed into a routine mechanism. A noticeable number of researchers maintain a secure position within their academic institutions through inappropriate authorship. In the worst-case scenario, where there are many inappropriate authorships, it turns into “publishing papers tribally”.

Tribally co-authored papers can be defined as papers purportedly based on the work of an interdisciplinary research team while instead of using diverse scientific methods to tackle a complex problem, close friends and in less usual cases, even kin with unrelated disciplines are listed as co-authors. These authors, who either are friends or like-minded individuals form a tribe, share their work primarily within their respective research and

occasionally in different fields of research topics.

The most deleterious aspect of tribal co-authoring is simultaneous publishing of papers in many different fields of research while some of the authors of these types of papers have different expertise. Tribal co-authoring, as a deviated branch of interdisciplinary-based scientific papers, is now gradually becoming a popular, prompt and effective way to gain job promotion in some academic campuses. The other and more luxurious situation is when the author is in a busy and high ranked position goes to frequent domestic and international trips, while simultaneously and of course remotely oversees numerous postgraduate projects or apparently collaborates in multiple papers within a year. This situation defies all the responsibilities that have been defined for a scholar in academic centers. Co-authoring means co-responsibility, a fact that may be neglected by many co-authors.

A group of individuals specialized in different areas of research and methodologies are invited to analyze and harness various aspects of a complex problem. In an interdisciplinary approach, the problem under investigation is explained in detail to different specialists and then it is expected that team members to express their different views and perspectives to provide a comprehensive image and deeper insight about the problem. An effective interdisciplinary process needs human skills, real and genuine teamwork, leadership, tolerance and altruism (Licitra *et al.*, 2016; Taberna *et al.*, 2020). Among all these criteria, however, it appears that altruism is replaced by tribalism. If football referees can readily detect cases of diving during a match, editors can likewise find the no role member(s) of the tribe in such papers.

In a published paper originated from interdisciplinary research, the method(s) used by each author must be defined to convince the reader that the specific discipline has been exploited properly by an expert (Licitra *et al.*, 2016). This provides compelling evidence for the reader

that each individual has given necessary dedication and commitments to study the issue under investigation. Many journals are now requesting the corresponding author to explain the specific roles of the co-authors at every stage of the research process. However, we may find that an interdisciplinary paper has only a handful of technical competencies with many co-authors who are not experts in the areas covered in that paper.

The rule, “publish or perish” is still the main governing and provoking factor for many university scholars to survive in the competitive atmosphere of academic community. The pressure of this old misleading rule to increase the number of publications has marginalized the moral worth and integrity of “the cognitive and intellectual endeavors” and further has led to unethical practices at some academic centers. In addition to the intrinsic tendency and character that some researchers have for frequent publication, the instigating policy of some institutional authorities to increase the number of publications is the main factor for the phenomenon of “publishing paper tribally”. These factors have resulted in surprisingly huge rise in emergence of either newly scientific journals or the predatory ones as well (Rawat and Meena, 2014). The chance of publication, nowadays, is not dependent on the quality, originality and entity of the papers submitted to many of these journals. This is because the survival of the journal is relying on “anyway anyhow publication” rule.

The main question is if the criteria for authorship require a significant, effective and noticeable contribution, is it possible to publish dozens of publications per year by a university researcher? The surprising point is that many of these types of people are often either head of departments, senior professors or high-ranked governmental managers.

Mostly, it is the scientists’ skills that connect the academic centers with the relevant industries as well as the demands of the public. Requesting a high number of papers as a prerequisite for university employment/promotion can push the applicant to the dire well of “publishing paper tribally”. The scientific community and taxpayers are the primary victims of this ominous

conversion. In a further perspective, it is the wisdom and innovation that are being sacrificed in the academic centers through the combined pressure of “publish or perish” and “tribal paper publishing”. Examining millions of papers, it was reported that geographically dispersed collaborators tend to produce a lower number of foundational discoveries compared to researchers who physically work together at the same site (Adams, 2023). The research productivity has experienced a decline, and moreover, there is evidence indicating a decrease in breakthrough innovation as well (Adams, 2023; Park *et al.*, 2023). The reason behind this decline has been stated as unknown (Kozlov, 2023). Could the synergic effect of “publish or perish” and “publishing paper tribally” partly contribute for the decline in breakthrough science? It appears that the rule “do work effectively or make room for others” could be a more effective one for overseeing academic institutions.

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