

Questionable Publishing: Case Study of a Memory Error



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Abstract

In the context of the debate about academic publishing, a personal error in memory for the title of a journal article is presented and analyzed in a case study, with implications for reviewing and editorial standards.

Keywords: publishing practices, memory error

Introduction

For many years, there has been vigorous debate about academic publishing in general and in psychology in particular. The major issues are reviewing and editorial standards [1,2], the replication crisis [3] and, more recently, the existence of so-called “predatory” journals [4,5]. These journals may appear to conduct reviews but they are cursory at best. Essentially these outlets are online vanity presses that charge the author and publish almost everything submitted [6-8]. There is objective evidence that the quality of the content in these journals is lower than in standard journals [4].

Some pranksters have exposed the lack of standards in predatory journals by submitting spoof papers and having them published [9]. An extreme example of gobbledygook designed to expose weak standards is the use of the computer to generate text that makes little sense [10]. Strange titles have appeared (e.g., “*Deconstructing wide-area networks: Application of theory to cell communication*”, [11], with puzzling content: “Our experiences with Titanous Ceint provide support and confirm the algorithm to study IPv7 by O. Jackson runs in $O(\log n)$ time”.

In contrast, as an upfront joke, other papers have been published in a journal that specializes in humour (e.g., “*The (long) nose doesn't have it: Nose length as a factor in salt and pepper passage*”, [12]; *The Journal of Irreproducible Results*).

Case Study

Description: In the course of a recent personal discussion with another academic about this debate, I recalled an example

of what I perceived as a very strange and possibly meaningless paper that was published in a standard journal *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, *PMS* that had been in existence since 1949. I reported that the title was “*Eye color and cheese preference*”. I informed my colleague that I had exchanged correspondence with the editor about this paper and would forward him a copy of the paper.

Having searched my files without success, I searched for the paper using the keywords “eye color” and “cheese” on *PMS* website and, in case I had misremembered the journal in which it appeared, with the standard search engines. Papers appeared with “eye color” or “cheese” in the titles, but never both together. In particular, no paper with my recalled title had ever been published in *PMS*. I was extremely surprised, because I was sure that I had correctly remembered that title.

I then consulted another colleague who, I recalled, had also been aware of this paper and of my correspondence with the editor. He confirmed the correspondence, but did not remember a paper with eye colour and cheese in the title. However, he pointed to another publication in *PMS* with the title “*Race differences in the selection of cheese colour*” [13]. Furthermore, he reminded me that we had mentioned this paper in a co-authored article on publication practices Standing, [2]! We characterized it as an “arcane investigation”. Although this study was not concerned eye colour and cheese preference, it seemed strange to us. Presented with a plate of American white cheese and a plate of American yellow cheese, participants selected one

piece of cheese. For white participants, slightly more chose white than chose yellow, and for black participants, more chose yellow than chose white. Although I had incorrectly recalled the title of the paper, I had correctly recalled my correspondence with the editor, who defended its dissemination on the grounds that the journal was open to unconventional ideas and that the data that might one day prove to be interesting, presumably on theoretical or practical grounds.

Analysis: How can my recall error be accounted for? Memory mistakes have been the topic of much research [14,15]; Various kinds of errors have been identified, and their causes explored [16]. In particular, although association has been shown to facilitate memory, it can also cause problems Roediger and [15-17]; My memory error may have been based on mistaken associations, particularly after a long period of time not thinking about the paper. The original paper had both “cheese” and “color” in the title. However, although people have cheese taste preferences, it would be unusual for them to prefer cheese simply because of colour . Therefore I may have disconnected the term “ colour” in the title from its link to cheese. In contrast, I did not associate “ colour” with the participants in the study, even though they were Black or Caucasian. The study of race differences is controversial, and may have caused me to forget (repress?) the color-participant association. On the other hand, color is often associated with the eyes, and there have been many studies in *PMS* around the same time period (1980s) that included eye colour as a variable. Some of these are almost as improbable as the misremembered title (e.g., “*Eye colour and fast food consumption*”, Salter & Bloom, 1983; “*Effects of eye color on frisbee toss*”, Beer [18]. Perhaps the link between colour and cheese in the original title was transposed in my memory to a link between color and eyes, which had been a topic in the journal.

Conclusion

The memory error reported here arose in the course of a discussion about publication practices and questionable research topics. Even though I was mistaken in the title of the paper, the real paper is itself arcane. It behooves all reviewers and editors, whether at *PMS* or *PBSIJ* or elsewhere to be critical about research studies, no matter where they appear. Why was the study conducted? Does it have theoretical or practical applications? Was it well designed? Reviewing and

editing are imperfect human endeavours, but we must demand highstandards to uphold the integrity of academic publishing.

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