

Editorial

'Paper mills': A detestable blot like no other

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The standard dictionary definition of 'Paper mills' refers to a factory devoted to making paper from vegetable fibres such as wood pulp, old rags and other ingredients¹. However, the very same phrase is used in this communication to mean Academic Paper Mills that churn out false research papers and essays, on demand, to suit the requests of those who make use of them to secure publications. It is a real threat to, and a blot on, the hallowed sentiments and time-honoured traditions of academic research integrity.

The real problem of this stain on academia came to light when Laura Fisher, the Executive Editor of the reputed journal, *RSC Advances*, published by the Royal Society of Chemistry in the United Kingdom, noticed striking similarities between research papers submitted to that journal². Ostensibly, none of the papers had authors or institutions in common, but their charts and titles looked disturbingly similar. Fisher had declared in her own words "I was determined to try to get to the bottom of what was going on". She launched an investigation, and that led a year later in January 2021, to her retracting 68 papers from the journal. Fisher had stumbled on what seemed to be the products of 'paper mills', the companies that roll out fake scientific manuscripts to order². The journal's publisher, the Royal Society of Chemistry, announced in a statement, that it had been the victim of what it believed to be "the systemic production of falsified research"³.

In fact, delinquency in academic writing is no longer restricted to just slovenly "cut and paste" endeavours or authors lifting significant or large portions of an article on the same topic. It has become a lot more sophisticated, complex and quite difficult to detect now. The actual *modus operandi* seems to have completely changed. These days, anyone can simply visit a rather large number of paper or essay mills that are strewn all over the internet and arrange for the production of a complete article to be presented as his or her own, in return for a pre-arranged payment⁴. These disturbing industries are not likely to just go away. Paper mills cannot be policed readily or shut down by legislation. Furthermore, quite ominously, there is a real caveat here as they ostensibly provide the kind of 'service' that a troubling number of students and authors will use without any qualms.

It is of paramount importance to realise that handling this newest form of academic deceit, a real threat even to science, will require a committed effort and hard work from reputable academia and a renewed obligation to scholastic veracity from erudite communities and scientific journals. The paper mills bring up 'Shadow Scholars' and 'Ghost Authors'. As far back as November 2010, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published an article that turned the academic world upside down⁴. In that publication, an anonymous author with a pseudonym, confessed to having written more than 5,000 pages of erudite scholarly work a year on behalf of university students⁴. Surprise, SURPRISE..., even ethics were among the many issues this unnamed author had tackled for his or her clients. A little more recently, in June 2015, at a conference about plagiarism held in the Czech Republic, one speaker revealed that up to 22% of students in some Australian undergraduate programmes had admitted to buying, or were intending to buy, purpose-written assignments on the internet⁵.

The paper mill business is indeed a booming enterprise. One site even claims to have received two million hits each month for its 5,000 or so freely downloadable papers. Another site quite nonchalantly allows charlatans to electronically interview the people who will write their papers. Some of these paper mills even claim to employ university professors to guarantee the quality of the work. Such is the audacity of these despicable ventures. To add to all the associated problems, policing and legislation become difficult because the company selling assignments may be domiciled in one country while its "suppliers", the 'ghost writers', are based elsewhere in the world, and the client, could be anywhere else; New York, Lagos, London, Paris, Nairobi, Johannesburg, Moscow, Beijing, Kuala Lumpur, Osaka or for that matter, even Colombo, Sri Lanka.

There is big money to be made in this dastardly scheme. The very same anonymous writer whose paper mill tales shocked the academia, had quite dispassionately explained in the article, which kinds of students were using these services and just how much they were willing to pay⁴. He or she has gone on record as to say that, at the time of his original writing, he was able to make about US\$ 66,000 that year. His three main client groups were students for

whom English is a second language, students who are struggling academically and a separate group of those who are plain lazy and rich. He had also pompously and coolly claimed *"I live well on the desperation, misery and incompetence that your system has created"*.

Genuine research in bio-medical aspects is ever so important simply because it has a distinct connection with real-life patient care. In that perspective, fraudulent research has the potential to cause irreparable harm. It was Sir William Osler FRS, FRCP, frequently referred to as the Father of Modern Medicine and the greatest diagnostician ever to wield a stethoscope, who once said "Medicine is a science of uncertainty and an art of probability". If that axiom is mixed up with pedagogic fraud, which most certainly includes the definitive products of paper mills, the potential damage that could be caused by such academic deception is absolutely horrendous. In such a context, it is imperative that we try our best to detect and deal with academic fraud emanating from paper mills; the callous end products that could destroy science itself.

There are perhaps two ways in which one could try to control this menace of paper mills. The first has to do with universities and other scientific and scholastic institutions. Universities and academic establishments the world over, exist to advance thought leadership and moral development in society. As such, their researchers and teachers must be role models and must promote ethical behaviour within the institution. There should be a zero-tolerance policy for academics who cheat. Extensive instruction should be provided to students about the pitfalls of scholastic cheating and they must be taught techniques to improve their own academic writing skills. Universities and other higher educational facilities must develop a culture of integrity and maintain this through ongoing and continuous dialogue about the values on which academia are based. They also need to develop institutional moral responsibility by examining how student cheating is dealt with, as well as by very strongly confronting the erring academics. They need to develop a system of carefully examining resistance to reporting of misdemeanours and dealing with such cheating, while taking a firm and hard stand on student teaching. If this is done well, institutional values of veracity of research will become adopted and practised as the norm. However, developing such cultures require determined and strict leadership at very senior and decision-making levels in these institutions.

The second way is vigilance on the part of scientific journals. As was so clearly shown above, the whole problem came to the forefront most recently because

of the vigilance on the part of an alert and suspicious editor. All journals need to make a concerted effort to try and detect inconsistencies as well as blatant similarities of the presentation and style in submissions to their publications. In fact, it is not only the editors but also members of Editorial Boards and Reviewers who should be on the lookout for evidence that some submissions may have originated from paper mills. Currently, it is not at all sufficient to run a manuscript through a plagiarism checking software program. It will not detect the major portion of the iceberg. Measures taken to detect suspicious submissions early needs to be built into the system and once some degree of suspicion is aroused, the article needs to be further evaluated and important searching questions asked from the authors. As has happened in the not too distant past, retraction of published papers is perhaps a bit late in this entire saga but yet for all that, it could act as a form of a deterrent.

A quarter of a century ago, in his early days as an Editor, this author worked with that great lady, late Dr Stella De Silva, Emeritus Editor of the Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health. She once declared *"if something in a submission to the journal looks even a bit 'fishy', it would invariably turn out to be quite fishy"*. Immortal words that have been proven way beyond doubt, over and over, again and again. We, for our part, have tried our best to look relentlessly for 'something fishy' in the submissions to our journal.

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