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The Retraction Watch retraction: how bad advice became worse advice for scientists and academics

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Abstract

In 2015, the Retraction Watch leadership, Adam Marcus and Ivan Oransky, retracted an article that they had written for *The Lab Times* in 2013. According to Marcus and Oransky, in the 2013 piece, they had offered "bad advice" to academics. In the 2013 piece, Marcus and Oransky suggested that when an error, actual or potential, was detected in a published paper, that they should first contact – by name or anonymously – the editor, then the author, and finally the research institute, following Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines. They also recommended readers to copy Retraction Watch on their communications – most likely so that Retraction Watch could gather a scoop – suggesting even that by mentioning or copying Retraction Watch would twist the arm of the editor, and perhaps speed up – or influence – the journal's action, or decision. Offering such bad, flawed and

unscholarly advice, claiming boldly, without any citations "that cronyism can protect obvious fraud", the 2013 *Lab Times* piece was a clear act of anti-science advice. Clearly recognizing their own bad advice, and flawed and misleading logic, but taking considerable time to do so, Adam Marcus and Ivan Oransky retracted their 2013 article in December of 2015, but replaced it with a substitute offering even worse advice, indicating to concerned academics to scrap their 2013 advice of contacting authors, editors and academic institutes, and opting instead for a potentially biased anonymous option, using a whistle-blower website, PubPeer. Marcus and Oransky failed to indicate any financial or other conflicts of interest in their *Lab Times* piece. This is important, because, as we now know, the marriage between these watchdogs has been in the pipe-line for years now, reaching public prominence in early 2016 during a meeting in UC Berkeley, and culminating in generous financial backing – in the hundreds of thousands of US\$ – by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, to both Retraction Watch and PubPeer. This commentary examines how the retraction of one badly written journalistic piece for lack of professionalism led to the emergence of an even worse article full of biases. Perspectives on how this could be interpreted, and what should happen, are provided.

Bad advice offered to academics, including scientists, by Retraction Watch

In January of 2013, Adam Marcus and Ivan Oransky, the co-founders of Retraction Watch³, a scientist-shaming blog, wrote an article for *The Lab Times*, an online "news magazine for the European life sciences", in 2013 (Marcus and Oransky, 2013). Very unexpectedly, almost three years later, they retracted their flawed article claiming that they had offered bad advice to academics and scientists, opting to publish a new set of advice to the same academics that they had ill-advised about three years earlier. In their new article, also in *The Lab Times*, published in December of 2015, Marcus and Oransky stated "we want to retract one of the suggestions we made" (Marcus and Oransky, 2015). There are many problems with the original 2013 article, and also the 2015 article, both offering bad and worse advice, respectively. This commentary dissects both articles to better understand what may have gone wrong, to try and assess the hidden information gaps. It also shows that both pieces were not only badly and superficially written, they were unsupported by any evidence, literature or references, a sign of very poor academic behavior. Finally, no conflicts of interest (COIs) were declared, but were in fact hidden from the public.

³ <http://retractionwatch.com/>

Flaws with the 2013 article

The Marcus and Oransky (2013) article has, as the author sees it, multiple flaws. Firstly, many facts are stated, but none are substantiated by sources, references, or citations. A fact that is not supported by a supporting source is an “alternative truth”. In science publishing, there are severe penalties when scientists report facts in published papers without supporting sources, and in extreme cases, these may even result in retractions. So, the example set by Marcus and Oransky is poor, both academically, and ethically. Starting off their discussion, Marcus and Oransky, referring to the now-shuttered Paul S. Brookes⁴ site (www.science-fraud.org), misled the public and readers by stating “some saw the six-month-old site as a vital way to report alleged scientific misconduct.” In fact, this is not correct. The site was shut down by a DCMA notice because Brookes had misled scientists and the public by automatically associating every paper and scientist that had been profiled on his site, as fraud, or fraudulent. So, apparent libel is what caused the Brookes site to be shut down by legal threats. Even minuscule such as the precise day of the shut-down are confusing, with the Marcus and Oransky (2013) article indicating that “closed down the *Science Fraud* website late last year”, referring to the end of December 2012, whereas a report by Oransky at Retraction Watch (Oransky, 2013), published on January 3, 2013, indicates that “the whistleblower site Science Fraud, which went dark yesterday in response to legal threats”, referring to January 2, 2013. Thus, Marcus and Oransky reporting can be inaccurate, undermining accurate, trustworthy and reliable science journalism (Bubela et al., 2009).

This background indicates that the Retraction Watch leadership enjoys dabbling in “alternative facts”⁵, even before this term was informally coined by President Trump’s Counselor, Kellyanne Conway, on January 22, 2017, just after the inauguration of Donald J. Trump as the 45th US President. The use of inaccurate and misleading journalism poses a risk to society, and to science (Teixeira da Silva, 2017a). Alternative facts, which are equivalent to mis- or disinformation, lies, or false propaganda, which are basic elements of tabloid journalism (Popović and Popović, 2014), is a dangerous example being set by these science-trolling journalists to academia. Oransky (2014) was clearly inspired by a Brookes interview in *Science*⁶ promoting PubPeer for the anonymous critique of scientific papers. So much so

that the Brookes experience may have inspired Marcus and Oransky to dump, via a retraction, their 2013 article, to set a PubPeer-supporting stance in their 2015 *Lab Times* article.

So, to counter the failed fraud-accusing policy that had been imposed by Brookes, Marcus and Oransky (2013) stated: “we wanted to offer some thoughts on how readers can best call attention to potential problems in the literature.” Marcus and Oransky, acknowledging that anonymous complaints “may be wielded as vendettas or used to cripple competition”, offered a few ways to achieve this in a non-anonymous manner: a) contact a journal editor with a suspected problem in a paper; b) contact the authors; c) contact the authors’ research institute or an office of research integrity when contact with editors or authors yielded no response, using the “electronic trail” used to attempt to correct the literature as the evidence that editors and authors were uncooperative to correcting the literature. Marcus and Oransky based their advice heavily on the advice offered by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), which they defined inaccurately as the Committee for [sic] Publication Ethics, further cementing the sloppy and lax nature of the science journalism by this pair. Claiming that COPE is “not hostile to anonymous complaints,” even embracing anonymous complaints, the next advice offered by Marcus and Oransky was “to resist the temptation to take out your frustrations in personal attacks against the editors or authors with whom you’re corresponding”, noting that such an approach could reduce the responsiveness of editors to future complaints. Readers are drawn to the discussion of the pros and cons of anonymity in the context of the post-publication peer review process (Teixeira da Silva and Blatt, 2016). In fact, until this point of their 2013 article, the suggestions made by Marcus and Oransky were reasonable, fair, and realistic, to face problematic authors, journals, editors or publishers head-on, directly, by name, or, where there may exist a fear of retaliation, anonymously. However, this is the point in the Marcus and Oransky (2013) article that destroys the entire and core academic basis of their argument, simply showing that this is an egotistical narcissistic pair of science journalists that are seeking only to draw attention to their blog rather than dealing with the fundamental ills that plague science. They stated: “Readers should also feel free to copy us on correspondence, although we would prefer it if you somehow made it clear you’re not acting on our behalf.” In other words, Marcus and Oransky want to be associated in some way with the credit for blowing the whistle, but they don’t want any responsibility associated with the claim, disguising their argument as “journalistic independence”. The nail in this coffin of bad advice comes with this

⁴ <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/people/23781238-paul-brookes>

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternative_facts

⁶ <http://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2014/03/paul-brookes-surviving-outed-whistleblower>

statement, “knowing a well-read website is aware of the allegations can prompt quicker action, although we make no promises.” Here, too, Marcus and Oransky sought recognition for Retraction Watch, through its “fame factor”, while washing their hands free of any liability or association with the anonymous complainant or whistle-blower. A legally smart defense, no doubt. Finally, Marcus and Oransky claim that “cronyism can protect obvious fraud,” but offer no examples or citations to support their claim. For the record, a clear example is the Serbian *Archives of Biological Sciences* (Teixeira da Silva, 2015).

The most glaring problem with that 2013 article by Marcus and Oransky is the failure to provide any concrete affiliation, other than their association with Retraction Watch. It is now known that both authors held and hold multiple positions.

Flaws with the 2015 article

Marcus and Oransky must surely have felt guilty, or it is possible that their funders (see hidden COI later) or partner COPE may have called them out. Whatever the truth is, the public will never truly know, because Oransky and his Retraction Watch are extremely opaque with the public regarding their own practices, and with scientists who have seen through their journalistic farce. The new 2015 article starts with an “alternative fact”, by stating “Better *not* contact the authors first.” This is odd, because the advice to contact authors in their 2013 article was indicated as the second step of contacts, after contacting the editors. So, not only do Marcus and Oransky try to correct a false and misleading fact, they continue to display poor attention to detail, thereby fortifying the notion that their science journalism is of poor quality (see more evidence later in this commentary). They then state “we want to retract one of the suggestions we made.” This retraction in itself is very odd. Why would a simple correction not have sufficed, or an updated article indicating that their views had changed, and evolved, which seem to be reasonable solutions to their 2013 opinion article. Instead, what drove this science watchdog pair to bow their head in apparent shame and retract a fairly hollow opinion piece? In a liberal and pathetic apologetic culture, Marcus and Oransky weep, clearly with crocodile tears, wailing loudly “we’ve realised that we were wrong” and “we offer apologies to the scientific community”. Apology accepted, but was it truly necessary? Using the excuse that by alerting authors ahead of time “only serves to give unethical scientists time to hide their tracks”, Marcus and Oransky fail to understand that their bad advice in 2013, and even worse advice in 2015, does not take into consideration that most likely most scientists are not guilty of misconduct, but may have simply

made errors that require fixing. In essence, Marcus and Oransky collectively clump together honest (likely the majority) and dishonest (likely the minority) scientists, as if they are all escaping the truth commissions set up by libelous and masked fraud-accusing whistle-blowers like Paul S. Brookes on anonymous accusation sites like PubPeer. To their credit, Marcus and Oransky state correctly that “there are still too many [editors; Jaime] who rebuff efforts to correct the literature”, but they shoot down the option to first contact the editors, indicating that it is best practice to contact research integrity officers instead. The problem is that most developing countries most likely do not have offices of research integrity in their research institutes, making their advice unrealistic, and thus silly.

In the last section of their 2015 article, Marcus and Oransky propose a silver bullet to correcting science’s erroneous literature: PubPeer. The most glaring problem with the 2015 article by Marcus and Oransky was their failure to indicate a very important COI, namely that the parent organization for Retraction Watch, The Center for Science Integrity Inc. (CSI⁷), a business-turned-charity based in New York and in Oransky’s apartment, receives generous funding by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation⁸, the MacArthur Foundation⁹, and the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust¹⁰. A second hidden COI, but directly relevant to the 2013 article, maybe explaining their passionate defense of COPE, was that Elizabeth Wager, a former COPE Chair from 2009-2012, serves as a director of the CSI¹¹. So, these currently hidden COIs show that there is a revolving door between power and ethics, and, thrown into the mix, money and funding from philanthropic organizations.

As we entered 2017, academia learned that the PubPeer Foundation, PubPeer’s parent charitable organization, has received over US\$ 400,000 from the same philanthropic organization as Retraction Watch’s parent organization, the CSI, namely the Laura and John Arnold Foundation. This, in itself, is astonishing because it places the relationship between Retraction Watch and PubPeer as the most prominent financial COI in the science watchdog and post-publication peer review movements. At the end of their 2015 article, Marcus and Oransky state “*We’re glad to have the chance to retract some of our previous advice and update it, as new evidence*

⁷ <http://retractionwatch.com/the-center-for-scientific-integrity/>

⁸ <http://www.arnoldfoundation.org/>

⁹ <https://www.macfound.org/>

¹⁰ <http://www.helmsleytrust.org/>

¹¹ <http://retractionwatch.com/the-center-for-scientific-integrity/board-of-directors/>

comes to light. That's what self-correction is all about, right?" If these science watchdogs (Teixeira da Silva, 2016) truly believe what they stated at the end of 2015, then they must go back to their 2015 *Lab Times* article, and retract it for the reasons listed above, or issue a mega-correction that adds suitable references to support factual information, and state the highly important and relevant missing COIs, which continue to be missing.

Cynthia McKelvey, in a blog article entitled "Science watchdog blog retracts its own article"¹², makes an extremely pertinent statement: "We're not sure if the retraction will be included in Retraction Watch's upcoming database, but it seems likely." A search of that database¹³ indicates, in fact, that the retracted 2013 article by Marcus and Oransky is still not listed, making *Retraction Watch*, its leadership and its directors blatantly dangerous hypocrites.

Ethical issues

There are multiple ethics-related aspects to this case. Adam Marcus and Ivan Oransky are trying to be legitimized as ethicists, but they are not. They are science journalists with a medical background that have smartly surrounded themselves by hand-picked allies, such as COPE, that give them a fake aura of ethical legitimacy. In turn, organizations that continue to invite Oransky to serve as guest speaker or moderator at ethics-related events also contribute to his rise as pseudo-ethicist.

Paul S. Brookes used at least one fake, anonymous or pseudonymous identity to smear academics' reputations, and referred widely to their errors as fraud. Marcus and Oransky of Retraction Watch offered support to and defense of Brookes' actions in their 2013 *Lab Times* article, which they then retracted. It can be argued that the Retraction Watch team sought to promote whistle-blowing not in the interests of academia, but rather as a self-serving interest (Ahmad et al., 2014) as an effective and strategic way to reap highly profitable funding from US philanthropic organizations. Whistle-blowing does play a corrective role in publishing (Malek, 2010), but its skewed encouragement by Marcus and Oransky, without respect for the rank and file present in the publishing process, i.e., the call to fly over the editor and publisher, claiming cronyism as their reason to subvert the standard processing of error, opting instead to encourage informants to release their discoveries on PubPeer. This fortifies that the call by the Retraction Watch leadership to use whistle-blowing carries with it an element of malice.

The lack of information sources to support a claim constitutes a violation of journalistic ethics¹⁴. The Marcus and Oransky 2013 and 2015 *Lab Times* articles are replete with information that is not supported by any citation to sources. In publishing, such writing practice is not only unprofessional, it is unethical, because it is the appropriation of ideas that are not one's own but without disclosing the relevant source, i.e., a classical case of plagiarism.

The most striking ethical issue with the 2013 and 2015 *Lab Times* articles is the distinct absence of a COI statement. The most glaringly absent COI is that between Retraction Watch and PubPeer, which now share a financial COI, namely the receipt of funding from the same philanthropic association, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation. Even if, at the time of publication of those articles, funding had not yet been received, this post-publication fact remains omitted, even in the retract-and-replaced article. The omission of important facts and COIs constitutes serious misconduct (Thornton, 2017).

Finally, the fact that Marcus and Oransky have not yet archived their own retraction in the Retraction Watch database can be minimally described as hypocrisy.

Conclusions

Several important conclusions can be drawn.

1) Bad advice was given by Retraction Watch's senior leadership to global academia, via a public online channel, on at least two occasions. Even though the Retraction Watch co-founders are cognizant of their bad academic advice, which could have caused real damage to scientists that may have followed that advice in the intermittent three years, their apology lacks sincerity, is too jovial, and does not go far enough to cleaning up the continued bad advice offered in their follow-up 2015 article.

2) Science journalism operates with values and communication morals that are inferior to those embraced by science. Unsupported claims, lack of references, and the lack of a COI statement, Retraction Watch's Adam Marcus and Ivan Oransky serve as a bad ethical example, in these articles, for academics, including scientists.

3) Marcus and Oransky are frequently invited and interviewed and what they say, how they say it and what advice they may be offering the public, academia and scientists has to be very carefully analyzed. How frequently is misappropriation of information (i.e., the use of facts without attributing the source, or a form of plagiarism) taking place, and is this a standard writing form that Retraction Watch is trying to impose upon academics? Are hidden COIs a standard that they wish academics to follow, while ignoring COPE guidelines?

¹² <https://www.dailydot.com/parsec/retraction-watch-retracts-own-article/>

¹³ <http://retractiondatabase.org/RetractionSearch.aspx>

¹⁴ <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

4) Post-publication peer review does not exist simply for the sustained existence of Retraction Watch, PubPeer and their anti-science supporters, but is also a tool that exists to scrutinize Retraction Watch and PubPeer, and what their leadership have stated in public, so that their stances can be closely scrutinized so that one day in the future, these organizations and their leadership may be held accountable for the damage that they have caused.

5) Retraction Watch and its leadership have already several documented problems: a) poor editorial and journalistic standards (Teixeira da Silva, 2016b); b) bias, opacity and lack of reciprocity (Teixeira da Silva, 2016c); c) an apparent interest in issues unrelated to retractions (Teixeira da Silva, 2016d), as also evidenced by hidden COIs; d) the use of slang and profanity (Teixeira da Silva, 2017b); e) hiding facts about Oransky's professional publishing history (Teixeira da Silva, 2017c); f) undisclosed acknowledgment by PubPeer of Retraction Watch as media/press (Teixeira da Silva, 2017d). These documented characteristics begin to paint a picture of an organization that is not truly interested in the integrity of science, in retractions, or in the best interests of science and scientists. Instead, these documented qualities show that we are dealing with a very powerful, strongly conflicted, well financed anti-science movement that is losing trust, even as it builds incredible power. While scientists focus one eye on their science, they would also do well to focus their other eye on Retraction Watch and its long-term objectives, and on the modus operandi in place to achieve its goals, including its suspect association with PubPeer and COPE.

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, often with issues unrelated to retractions. The author has also been profiled by PubPeer. The author has commented on Retraction Watch and used PubPeer, as a signed commentator, and anonymously.

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