



The Treason of The Editors - How Scientific Journal Editors Changed Sides

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ABSTRACT

A brief account of the Medical Hypotheses Affair may be found here:

<http://medicalhypotheses.blogspot.com/2010/05/medical-hypotheses-affair-times-higher.html>

But there is one general aspect which I learned from the experience, and which is - I think - worth further emphasis.

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THIS IS THE ASPECT OF THE DOG THAT DIDN'T BARK.

The Dogs whose silence throughout this episode was so highly significant were the editors of the major medical and scientific journals - indeed editors of all academic journals were silent.

Twenty five years ago there would, without any shadow of doubt, have been vigorous comment on the happenings at Medical Hypotheses from (say) the editors of Nature, Science, the New England Journal of Medicine, JAMA, the Lancet, the British Medical Journal and others. And the gist of this would have been: publishers must keep their hands-off editorial independence.

INSTEAD: SILENCE... TUMBLEWEED... CRICKETS...

The MeHy Affair was a very explicit and highly public example of a publisher intervening directly to over-ride the editor of an established scholarly journal. This was not merely affecting the conduct of academic discourse, but directly shaping the content of published academic discourse.

In their actions towards Medical Hypotheses, the publishers (Reed-Elsevier - who publish about 20 percent of the world scholarly journals, and a higher proportion of those journals with high impact in their fields) decided what went into the scholarly literature and what did not. More exactly, specific managers employed by a publishing corporation decided what went into the scholarly literature and what did not.

Precisely, the publishers of Medical Hypotheses acted unilaterally to withdraw two already-e-published papers from a scholarly journal and delete them from the online records. And then (in the period of time leading up to the editor being sacked) Elsevier managers continued to filter-out papers that had been formally accepted for publication by the editor (in other words the papers were officially 'in the press') - but which these managers regarded as unacceptable in some way, and therefore withdrew from the publication process.

In other words, managers took direct control of the content of the published academic literature.



Why was The Silence of the Editors so significant? In an abstract sense, Elsevier's behaviour contravened the basic established conduct of academic discourse - which is supposed to be independent of publishers and a matter decided between editors and scholars. Indeed, this was, by a strict 'legalistic' definition, a direct breach of the principle of academic freedom.

So - even abstractly considered - it would be expected that leading journal editors would have raised objections to the corruption of academic discourse.

But there is a much more direct and personal reason to expect leading editors to comment. Which is that condoning Elsevier's actions set a precedent for further instances whereby managers employed by publishers will simply over-ride editorial independence: managers will decide what gets into journals and what does not.

So, by remaining silent, each editor of each major journal made it more likely that in future their publisher would do the same to them as Elsevier did to Medical Hypotheses! And that when they did, nobody would get to hear about it.

In effect, the publishers would have their thumbs on the scales of science, the publishers could tip the balance of published scientific 'evidence' in whatever way they wanted - but science would be saying nothing: could say nothing - at least, nothing audible and authoritative.

Why would leading editors of major journals condone such a thing?

There is a simple explanation: that the editors are afraid. As in Vaclav Havel's Poster Test: the Silence of the Editors was a coded statement unambiguously (but deniably) meaning: "I am afraid and therefore unquestioningly obedient".

We now know for a fact that the editors of leading scholarly journals are not independent. We know for a fact that editors of leading journals are doing what publishers want. And that the editors of leading journals have accepted this situation as a fait accompli.

This particularly applies to The Lancet, which is published by Elsevier and used to be one of the two or three most important medical journals in the world.

In the past, the Lancet was a fiercely, indeed aggressively, independent journal. Past editors of the Lancet would not have imagined for a moment acceding to managerial pressure from publishers. Clearly things have changed, and the current Lancet is happy to operate as a smokescreen for the publishers influence on the medical science literature.

Yet the current Lancet editors went one step further than merely acceding to pressure from the publishers, they actually assisted the publishers in over-riding editorial independence in a pseudo-rational manner.

The Lancet arranged a 'show trial' whereby the papers which Elsevier management had withdrawn from Medical Hypotheses were 'refereed' by a group of anonymous persons such that it could be claimed that for the papers had been rejected by peer review.

This sham process was implemented by The Lancet, despite the blazingly obvious paradox that the main point of Medical Hypotheses was that it was editorially reviewed - not peer reviewed; on the rationale that MeHy provided a forum for papers which would probably be rejected by peer review, but which justified publication as hypotheses for other reasons.

There is only one coherent conclusion: that the modern Lancet is a lap-dog of its publisher.

What did I conclude from the Dogs That Did Not Bark? I realized that science was in an even-worse state that I had previously recognized. That the level of corruption and deception went both deeper and further than I had previously recognized. And that the role of major journals had moved beyond

acquiescence with the forces of darkness and into actual collusion.

The major scientific journals are a major part of the problem with science; and not a hope for the solution of the problem. Major journals and their editors are among the most dangerous enemies of real science - and the friends of deceptive dishonesty, fakery, cover-ups, hype, spin, money-for-kudos and careerism.

I realized that, in fact, science was not just sick, not just corrupt-ing, but in an advanced state of disintegration. That mainstream, prestigious science was in reality a fake: a pseudo-science; and the people who claimed to uphold scientific principles were merely upholding their own status and careers.

And I realized that this corruption was a problem of leadership; that the corruption actually came from the leadership - from the most successful scientist and the most prestigious journals - that science had rotted from the head downwards, which means that real scientists doing honest work must be looked-for at the periphery, not the centre; and among the obscure, not the prestigious.

And, after further reflection and research, this led my book *Not even trying: the corruption of real science* (University of Buckingham Press, 2011)