



Observations of an Owl (8)

Paper Diarrhoea

I don't know whether you readers enjoy going to conferences. But I can't help asking myself, if there were any fun to be had by scientists at meetings – just what exactly would this fun be? Perhaps to learn about new and exciting research, or even to discuss “work in progress”? Ahh no, don't fool yourself. No-one reveals what is really going on in

their lab right at that moment in time. You're all too busy presenting stuff already published months, maybe even years ago!

What about establishing ties to people who could become important for your career? Networking? Yes, I suppose this could be an essential motivation factor, especially for you younger ones. But is that *fun*?

And enjoying a couple of colourful drinks (you know, the ones with umbrellas and fancy things in them) with your pals every night after the official programmes have finished? Yes, that might be fun. But let's be honest, you usually regret it the morning after when desperately trying to follow the first session presentations – particularly if you're the chairman!

No, I'll tell you where I'm heading. In my days of regularly attending conferences, the greatest fun of all was a cracking session of slating sarcasm and taking the mickey out of certain unsuspecting colleagues. You could be sure to meet all the weirdest whackos of your field who almost knee-jerkingly attracted mockery. And yes, I must confess, my friends and I really revelled in this “sport” and spent many amusing hours, laughing 'til our sides split at the expense of others.

I specifically remember one particular German fellow. At a conference in France my friend Falcon suddenly tapped my shoulder with his wing, pointed toward him with his beak and scathingly croaked, “See that guy with the filthy feathers and crusty eyes? He's just taken over the chair from good old Hawk. What a let down. We call him ‘Dr. Diarrhoea’.”

“Why's that?” I asked.

“Produces one paper a week but they are almost never of any solid substance. You might as well just flush every single one of them down the pan! But I'm surprised that you don't know him; he works in your field.”

Yes, we really had fun with “Dr. Diarrhoea” during the rest of the conference (provided he was out of earshot).

However, I didn't have to wait long until this story took an unexpected turn, which unfortunately for me meant no more fun. Three weeks later I had “Dr. Diarrhoea” on my phone. I couldn't help myself, a grin immediately crept over my face but it rather rapidly disappeared as “Dr. Diarrhoea” proposed our collaboration on a certain project.

This is essentially how his phone monologue went, “I have just read your papers on ... interesting results, really interesting ... you know, I am working in my lab on a related topic using another interesting organism, perhaps you have read my papers ... my idea now is that if your tests could be done exploring the bene-

fits of our system, then maybe interesting things might emerge ... so my proposal is to send you one of my PhDs for a couple of days and perhaps she can perform your tests with our material together with somebody from your lab ... and who knows, perhaps we will end up with an interesting little paper together.”

To my own surprise, I heard myself respond, “Yes, why not! Just tell me when your student will be able to come and I'll arrange everything here.”

Two weeks later “Diarrhoea's” student came for three days and performed exactly one assay. So far, so good, I thought, case closed! I had finally had my own personal experience with “Dr. Diarrhoea”. I was terribly wrong. Only four days later I received a manuscript written by “Diarrhoea”. He had taken the data from the assay (which, remember, had only been done once!) to produce one figure and asked whether we could add two more, which we had essentially already published in a previous paper. “Of course, we can't use the same data for these”, he jovially wrote. “However, I am sure you have more data from similar experiments in the drawer that we can adjust for our paper.”

I was completely astounded. It took me two days before I was able to respond, even if our two figures were to present new data, all the results together were by far insufficient to account for even half a paper.

I immediately realised, of course, just how “Dr. Diarrhoea” managed to succeed my brilliant and honourable friend Hawk to his chair. It was by the sheer volume of publications! In this manner, it was no wonder that “Dr. Diarrhoea” was able to dash off one paper per week. Indeed, they appeared without exception in low impact journals, nevertheless the question remained as to how “Diarrhoea” was able to convince the referees for all these “low-substance papers”.

“Diarrhoea” therefore was a prime example of how people achieve a high paper quota by adhering to the so-called “least publishable unit” principle. Still not satisfied, our candidate even refined this principle by adopting an impertinent overlap strategy. Publish results A, B and C; then re-publish B and C together with D; after that write a paper about C, D and E...

Just how can people like him be stopped? My suggestion is simple (but it's not mine alone, by the way). When an advanced researcher applies for a job, he should be asked to compile only his three or four “best” papers and explain exactly why he judges them to be his best contributions to the field. If this was standard practise (the referees, by the way, would actually have time to *read* those papers) people would finally aim at producing excellent and comprehensive pieces rather than as many as possible. And I'd like to bet that people like “Dr. Diarrhoea” would never come into question.

If so, on the other hand, whom could we crown our conference clowns?

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