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What's behind paper retractions? (6)

Who Are You?

Editors should stop ignoring anonymous whistle-blowers.

Clare Francis is a thorn in many journal editors' sides. His – or maybe her; more on that in a moment – modus operandi is simple: he uses plagiarism detection software to compare various papers, then sends his findings to journal editors, often with a request for a retraction.

Many editors ignore him. Others sift through his complaints and respond.

Those that do reply often dismiss the alleged overlap, saying the paper might have been the full version of a conference abstract published earlier, or that it was simply a review. Francis doesn't like those responses and makes that clear in his own replies to editors.

Others respond by thanking him for pointing out a paper that, in fact, should be retracted. That happened recently with the *Biophysical Journal*, for example.

But the editors we'll focus on here are the types that respond with a variation on "we'd be happy to look into this if you tell us who you are and where you work."

An example, from an exchange about Francis between us and Eric Murphy, the Editor in Chief (EIC) of the journal *Lipids*:

"I think it is critical that people identify themselves in order for the EIC to know who is bringing about the accusation with regards to misconduct. As my students ... can tell you, misconduct, including self-plagiarism, can and has ruined careers. Hence, it is imperative that these cases are handled appropriately and often this includes contacting the accusing party."

"I think a recent misconduct case in Germany [of Silvia Bulfone-Paus] highlights how blogs and tipsters can disrupt the investigative process and people are then tried on-line and the damage lasts forever. Whether there was guilt or not has been and will continue to be irrelevant in some people's minds. Hence, I think the motive is important. Perhaps we have someone who merely wants to ruin someone else's career for personal reasons or for a perceived 'greater good' that they themselves believe gives them carte blanche to launch whatever accusation on the web via a blog. Without the individuals responsible for examining this accusation involved, the falsely accused are then potentially damaged for life via actions of someone who is not in a position to make that decision. In this case 'Clare' did contact the EIC of both journals but identifying themselves would have been helpful for follow-up via a phone call."

Others have couched anonymous campaigns in strong-terms. *Nature* called the letters about Bulfone-Paus' work "a

destabilizing force" and a "smear campaign". The wife of Alirio Melendez, who is being investigated by the National University of Singapore and has already had one paper retracted, with another subject to an Expression of Concern, also used the latter phrase to describe the anonymous tips that led to the scrutiny of her husband's work.

In a perfect world, we'd love to know who Francis and these other whistle-blowers are. (We think Francis uses various aliases, some with men's names, which is why we hedged on gender). Understanding someone's motivations for speaking out can add a great deal to a story. In the case of industry-funded medical research, it's critical.

But we're baffled as to why editors and institutions ignore private emails from anonymous whistle-blowers. Unless, of course, they're trying to find ways not to do the work of investigating the claims – work that, one way or another, is their responsibility.

Anonymity certainly can be used to deliver *ad hominem* attacks without fear of reprisals. We don't tolerate those on *Retraction Watch*. They're the main reason we end up deleting comments – thankfully not very often. Guess what: people who identify themselves have also left *ad hominem* attacks on the blog. We delete them, too.

Although anonymous *Retraction Watch* commenters have a frighteningly good ability to spot problems, such as image manipulation, and often turn out to have flagged papers that are later retracted, such tipsters aren't always right. That's why we check their facts. But people who identify themselves aren't always right, either.

In other words, we treat anonymous tipsters the same as we treat tipsters who send us plenty of information about themselves. We don't demand their real names or affiliations. Editors should do the same. That's because facts are stubborn things and we haven't seen any evidence yet that people who identify themselves have any more of a monopoly on them than those who want to remain anonymous – sometimes for excellent reasons.

Google recently tried banning people who wanted to use pseudonyms from Google Plus. The outcry was swift, as was Google's promise to reverse itself somehow. We'd urge editors to consider that. Then again, if editors and institutions want to keep being called out on ignoring problems in their ranks, we'll be happy to oblige.

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<http://retractionwatch.com>)