



The Academic Publishing Jungle: A Research University Grapples with The 800 Pound Elephant in the Editorial Office While Seemingly Unaware of (or Unwilling to) Confront the 800 Pound Gorilla Lurking in the Same Room

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Abstract

Given the current organizational requirements of higher education, where publication in scholarly journals is more important than ever for receiving tenure, promotion, salary increases and reduced teaching loads, there has been an aggressive campaign mounted to make sure such scholarship is published in “quality” rather than “predatory” journals. Yet, at the same time this effort is being undertaken with rigor, a second academic journal publication problem is being largely unnoticed and/or ignored: a problem the authors’ have labelled “academic publishing nepotism.” Like nepotism “on the job”, where favouritism is shown to members of a person’s family, “academic publishing nepotism” occurs when an author is published based, partially or totally, on interpersonal relationships rather than the quality of his or her manuscript. How these dual problems are handled at one major research University serves as an example of what shortcomings must be overcome before individuals wishing to publish in quality journals can do so with the assurance that their submissions are being judged based on what they say...not who they know.

Keywords: Academic Publishing Nepotism, Academic Scholarship, Publish or Perish

The University of South Florida is a relatively young school (founded in the 1950s) that is strongly committed to rewarding faculty who publish in scholarly journals. These efforts have been highly successful, gaining the institution national and international recognition for its research efforts. Currently ranked 44th among public universities in the latest U.S. News & World Report 2019 rankings, USF was recently granted a Phi Beta Kappa chapter and recognized as a "preeminent" University by the Florida legislature. In a 2018 report, USF notes it ..."was one of 49 public research universities nationwide classified as both a Doctoral University with 'Highest Research Activity ...' by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education(www.usf.edu/about-usf/points-of-pride.aspx)." The Carnegie Foundation for the Advance of Teaching also classified USF as"...a Doctoral University with Highest Research Activity, a distinction attained by only 2.5% of all post-secondary institutions (www.usf.edu/about-usf/points-of-pride.aspx)."

With its major focus on research publications, USF, like many other top-tier research institutions, became concerned when the 800-pound elephant in the publication process was finally recognized. This involved the evolution of so-called "predatory" journals: publications that allowed academicians to publish their research based not necessarily on scholarly merit but, rather, for a fee (even though some top journals do the same thing). Although the line between what was and what was not a predatory journal was not always distinct, there was enough differentiation to allow for administrators to insist that publications in certain journals would not "count" when it came to benefits offered publishing faculty. Rather than the quality of the article as the determining factor it became the journal in which the article was published. In the USF MUMA College of Business, where the authors are currently employed, a "Research Publication Policy" was put into place. The burden of proof for arguing that an article was not published in a predatory journal fell upon the faculty. The relevant section of the policy states in part: "Regardless of the form of dissemination, it is the responsibility of the faculty member to provide clear evidence that their research is published in a reputable, trusted form and outlet. If the journal is indexed in trusted services, such as

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the Web of Science, Scopus, and Cabell's White List, then the research is considered to be published in a credible outlet. If the journal is open access, the publisher should belong to the Open Access Scholarly Publishers' Association (OASPA). If the journal is not indexed and not open access, OASPA, then evidence must be provided by the faculty member on the legitimacy of the chosen outlet for dissemination including, at a minimum, substantive peer reviews received during the reviewing process (USF MUMA College of Business Research Publication Policy, Revised: April 27, 2018)."

By its stance, the USF MUMA College of Business is clearly trying to maintain the integrity of academic publishing.

Yet, while many universities are rigorously attacking predatory publishing, they seem oblivious to a second problem that compromises the integrity of the academic publishing process. We have labelled this second problem "academic publishing nepotism," a condition whereby a person is able to publish an article in a non-predatory journal based, in part or totally, because of an interpersonal bond between him/herself and those who are tasked with the authority to accept and publish an article in a journal. This is the 800-pound gorilla that threatens the integrity of academic scholarship.

But how can this "academic publishing nepotism" happen? One of the hallmarks of academic journal publication is the "double blind review", a procedure which is supposed to protect against this form of publishing. In theory, the approach should work; the problem is that in reality it often doesn't for one or more of the following reasons: (1) the acquisition editor (the editor who first receives the manuscript) allows the reviewers to "find out" who the author(s) is/are; (2) the acquisition editor decides to publish the article even though the reviews are mixed or negative; (3) the acquisition editor doesn't send out the manuscript for review, even though it is "required" and simply accepts it for publication. Some of the problems associated with "academic publishing nepotism" are well described in this narrative by a well-respected University of South Florida academician who, for obvious reasons, wrote these comments on the condition that he not be named.

"I've been an editor and, even with blind review, everyone knew who wrote the article." This faculty member goes on to note that he knew of a department chair who was a journal editor, and almost all the articles in one issue were submitted by faculty members from his department.

One of the reasons that the 800-pound "academic publishing nepotism" gorilla exists in academe has to do with the esoteric nature of academic publishing combined with a networking of small groups of faculty who come from the same schools and work with the same colleagues. This kind of "niche" topic and close-knit community of faculty leads to a natural inbreeding of sorts; a kind of academic incest where the same people develop a publishing "in-group" that is tough to break into from the outside.

One possible example of this "academic publishing nepotism" comes from the University of South Florida. In this instance, a departmental chairperson submitted a manuscript to a journal where one of his subordinate department members, over whom he exercised supervisory and evaluative control (e.g., determined course assignments, performance evaluation and recommendation for promotion), was a senior co-editor at that journal and had the final authority to accept or reject manuscripts for publication. Such situations, which are not uncommon, create potential conflicts of interest (or at least the appearance of impropriety) and is one reason why USF does not allow married couples to work in the same department *if* one spouse is in a position of supervision over the other. We believe the senior co-editor in the USF situation should recuse himself from the publication process in this instance and pass any manuscript from his academic unit supervisor on to another editor at the journal to handle. But what if he/she doesn't? And what if he/she makes this known to the supervisor? An unseemly situation has now gotten uglier. This kind of behavior is an open invitation for trouble; left unaddressed the 800-pound gorilla remains silent testimony to possible problems in the publication of scholarly works.

One way to lessen (if not eliminate) the potential conflict of interest or unfair advantage of such "academic publishing nepotism" problems would be the establishment of a requirement to report any interpersonal relationships between author(s) and members of the hierarchy of the journal who could play any role in any publication decision. Such disclosures might include, for example, relationships by blood, marriage, employment and/or financial interests.



It is to be expected that people who share the same research interests might also share certain work/professional connectivity, but such interpersonal relationships need transparency when they are significant enough to bring the issue of objectivity into question. Just as it is not always easy to define what is and what is not a predatory journal so, too, one should expect some difficulty defining under what circumstances an interpersonal relationship crosses the line between normal professional interaction and a situation where "academic publishing nepotism" could be involved. Although it is clear that a person who holds a supervisory position over a colleague should not submit any manuscript to that colleague for possible publication; it is not so clear if, for example, a person who serves on the editorial board of a journal should be allowed to send his/her work to that journal for possible publication. One might reasonably suggest that to avoid any issues of favouritism, the author might be better advised to submit his/her article elsewhere. In most cases, there are enough journal outlets available to disseminate one's work without choosing a journal where "academic publishing nepotism" may exist.

As scholarly academic publication the publish or perish syndrome continues to weigh heavily in the success or failure of a person's academic career, it is important that publication be based on merit alone. The authors believe that this article will have served its purpose if it alerts the academic community to "academic publishing nepotism" and the threat it poses to merit based publishing. It is the authors' hope that, in the future, institutions of higher learning will take steps to discourage authors from submitting articles to predatory publications and/or journals where interpersonal factors play a significant role in the publication decision. The integrity of academic publishing will be protected only when the authors' contributions are judged on what they say and not who they know. In the jungle that is academic publishing today, we must be vigilant and keep both the elephants and the gorillas out of journal editor's offices.