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Snub Publishing: Theory

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ABSTRACT

A new term in science publishing has been coined: "snub publishing". This refers to the intentional or unintentional omission of important references in a scientific paper, the erroneous or deliberate manipulation of a name such that it becomes distorted in the literature, or the removal of a name from a manuscript's author's list. In this introductory paper, a quantitative table is presented that would allow for the level of snub publishing of a manuscript to be somewhat quantified. This could serve an important function as a tool for members of the scientific community to implement one independent level of quality control, which would allow for the transparent evaluation of a scientist, editor, journal or publisher. As for any system, the use of such a system also has its risks.

Keywords: abuse, incomplete and incorrect representation, lack of professionalism and ethics, quality control, scale

DEFINING THE TERM "SNUB PUBLISHING"

"Snub publishing" is a new term that I have coined derived from personal experiences based on three groups of cases: 1) studies that have not been correctly referenced in other papers of the same topic; 2) incorrect representation of studies or the author's name in other papers that has shown quality control (QC) oversight by the authors, journal or publisher; 3) the deliberate omission or lack of representation of one professional by another. Such case studies will be presented elsewhere. Broadly, snub publishing refers to the intentional or unintentional removal or deliberate or convenient "forgetfulness" of professionals in the field and peers within scientific papers, or of important scientific papers, based on actual or potential or professional personal conflicts of interest. Snub publishing can also refer to the deliberate (or not) omission of relevant literature from reference lists. Finally, snub publishing in its most sinister form would involve the deliberate removal of an author's name from a manuscript based on clear conflicts of interest, differences of opinion, or pure revengeful attitudes, without ever even acknowledging that original author or authority. In addition to being ethically and morally incorrect, the latter form of snub publishing may even be criminal as it is a form of fraud. In the spirit of exposing fraud and creating a platform of publishing that is more transparent to the issues that it embraces, reporting snub publishing may be a new form of auto-regulated QC imposed by authors and not by publishers, creating more and more a level playing field. When publishers label QC as being the sole responsibility of the authors, or *vice versa*, there will always exist a gap. Snub publishing is one of those gaps. This new form of auto-control on the publishing industry could be born such that checks on scientists, journals and publishers can be performed independently by the scientific community, without fear of reprisals or criticisms, even though they, themselves, constitute a form of criticism.

HOW CAN THE LITERATURE BE OR BECOME DISTORTED?

When a scientific paper is written, it usually involves a serious, in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the available literature pertaining to that study's topic. This will often involve an exploration of pay-to-access data-bases of major commercial academic publishers, but it will now more frequently involve the search on publically available and open access (OA) data-bases such as Google Scholar® or a wealth of OA journals. After a comprehensive search, all the available literature is consolidated and the most important research results are represented, usually in the introduction and discussion sections. One may argue what constitutes the "most important" studies, but usually these are from peer-reviewed, internationally reputed scholarly journals in the field. It is usually the authors who select the literature they wish to represent in the manuscript text, but it is the responsibility of the editors (and hence journal and publisher) to ensure that that information is correct, and accurate, i.e., to instill a level of QC. This QC forms part of the responsibility of all three protagonists in the publishing process: the authors, journal editors and publisher (Teixeira da Silva 2013), although it would be difficult to quantify the level of responsibility held by each unless a thorough investigation is held.

Inevitably, a study with a wide topic will undoubtedly have a rich literature while a poorly-explored topic may have a relatively more narrow literature base. For example, if we were to explore the literature on tomato agronomy, we would find hundreds if not thousands of papers on a wide spectrum of data-bases. However, if we were to search for *in vitro* studies of *Cymbidium* orchids, the list would be restricted to, for example, between 30 and 50 on a global scale from all possible available data-bases. Therefore, scale and scope are central issues of snub publishing. Understandably, in the former case, the references that would form part of the literature base of a manuscript would have to be much more selective than the latter case, which might easily incorporate many if not most of the available literature in the introduction and discussion sections, either for background information in the former or as a pivot for comparison in the latter. It is very rare for an academic journal to strictly control the number of references that can be included, provided that they are pertinent (even if there exists a formal rule limiting the number of references allowed). Thus, the excuse that references could not be included because of a limitation to the number of references that can be included, is generally invalid. In the case of a review, indeed, there is absolutely no excuse why the entire set of pertinent literature should not be included. Thus, when pertinent literature is missing from the reference list of a review paper, or web-site, then there is serious reason for concern, and this is the "seed" for snub publishing.

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Opinion Paper

Table 1 Qualification and quantification of snub types in snub publishing.

Snub (problem, error, omission)[1]	Arbitrary value[2]	Rank[3]
Control (the ideal publication)		15
Omission of one or a few related references from a text or reference list	1	14
Omission of many related references from a text or reference list	3	9
Omission of one or a few important or key references from a text or reference list	2	11
Omission of many important or key references from a text or reference list	4	5
Excessive inclusion of references of one particular country or religion[4]	5	4
Misspelling in the text or reference list of one's own name or references	1	13
Misspelling (once or a few times) in the text or reference list of other scientists or references	2	10
Misspelling (many times) in the text or reference list of other scientists or references	3	8
Failure to make a conflict of interest statement	3	7
Failure to acknowledge a moderate form of assistance (e.g. supply of chemicals or lab equipment)	2	12
Failure to acknowledge a funding source	4	6
Failure to acknowledge one who has assisted with writing (i.e., ghost authorship)	6	3
Inclusion of a guest author	7	2
Exclusion of a valid author[5]	8	1

[1] It would be very difficult to understand whether a snub is deliberate or erroneous and whether quality control lies in the hands of the author, the journal editor or publisher. Most likely, all three share responsibility in the existence of a snub.

[2] The arbitrary value has been assigned on a scale of 1-8 where 1 is a low level of snubbing, while 10 is serious snubbing, possibly even criminality or serious ethical violations. Arbitrary values are cumulative, i.e., one paper may contain more than one type of snub (see text for example). This scale system is relative to a manuscript that has been thoroughly inclusive of all the pertinent literature, with the literature details thoroughly checked by the editors, and with the spelling and other details related to such literature thoroughly checked by the publisher, i.e., the ideal state of a publication (control) which incorporates the responsibilities of these three proponents of the publishing process, according to **Teixeira da Silva** (2013). The ranking of snubs is purely subjective.

[3] Rank is based on the arbitrary values and the matching colour code, green being no level of snubs and black being near-criminal snubs.

[4] There is evidence that nationalism and cultural bias occur in publishing in several cases in which an author is most likely to include a reference whose authors are of their country or religious and/or cultural background while filtering out authors and papers with authors that are not of the same country, religion or culture, leaving in only those essential references without which the introduction, materials and methods or discussion could not exist.

[5] The purposeful omission of an author that was in fact a valid author is ethically and morally wrong. Even if conflicts of interest exist between authors, the omission of an author is not the correct manner to resolve such conflicts. This act is not only treasonous (in scientific academic terms), but may also be illegal or fraudulent, since a published paper from which an author has been purposefully omitted is portraying an image to the scientific public that is false. The criminality is further enhanced when gains (salary, bonuses, research grants, etc.) are made based on the success of that publication (minus the valid author who may have made significant contributions to merit that success).

QUANTIFYING SNUB PUBLISHING

An excellent way to represent the level of snub publishing could be through arbitrary values (on a scale of 1-8) and colours, as represented in **Table 1**. How can **Table 1** be used to assess the "snub" nature of a paper? At the outset, **Table 1** does not represent a law, or a guideline. It represents an arbitrary interpretation of a new type of problem that I believe exists in publishing, and that needs some sort of a quantifiable system to be better characterized. When the problem can be better understood, quantified and characterized, then there exists the possibility of correcting it. For example, relative to an ideal publication, in which an author has thoughtfully and faithfully represented the literature and authors' names within that literature, and where the editor and publisher have equally exercised careful QC to minimize or remove errors, several possible "levels" of snub publishing occur. At the lowest level, for example, would be the omission of one or a few important references from a reference list, or the erroneous spelling of an author's name within a scientific paper. At the highest level of snub publishing would be the total omission of an author (this is not the same as ghost authorship) or the unjustified inclusion of another (e.g., in the form of guest authorship). Ghost authorship is the omission of a person or entity that has been directly involved with the research or paper writing but has not been duly acknowledged, or mentioned – often purposefully to mask the identity of that individual – but this will be the topic of a separate, future paper. Snub levels can be cumulative. For example, a paper might leave out a handful of key references and also incorrectly spell author's names and maybe accidentally forget to acknowledge someone who provided some important equipment used in the experiment. In the latter case, such a snub publication would be assigned an arbitrary value of 6 (2 + 2 + 2). In all cases, it is extremely difficult to prove whether an error or was deliberate or accidental. However, all cases reflect some failure in QC by one of the three proponents of the publishing process.

HOW COULD SUCH A SYSTEM BE USED OR ABUSED IN PRACTICE?

In most cases, seasoned scientists will know the literature in the field of study quite well. Thus, they will be able to judge whether a publication is a snub paper, or not, or whether it contains snub-like properties, for example excessive number of references from a single culture. They will then be able to quantify the level of snubbing taking place. Such a system could also be useful to evaluate a scientist, or a journal. In the former case, a low snub score in a paper might appear harmless, but repeated snub scores over several papers, or high snub scores in some papers might be cause for concern, or alarm. This could be extended to use by faculty or even possible employees as a screen test of scientific QC. The same theoretical principle would apply to the latter case, in which a scientist could independently assess the QC being conducted by a journal or publisher, without QC being dictated by that journal or publisher. In other words, the snub scale in **Table 1** could serve as a valuable tool by scientists to counter possible bias and excessive power by an editor, journal or publisher. A snub QC score could then easily be presented to the scientific community or to a publisher in cases of fraud, ethical violations, or challenges to the publication of a paper.

Naturally, such a system or classification could also be used for revenge attacks, which may or may not be justifiable.

CONCLUSION

Snub publishing may have in fact been around for a very long time, because many aspects of it are related to the lack of quality control by an author, an editor, or a publisher. This short paper not only provides a clearer definition of what it is, but also a quantifiable system that will allow the existence of such cases to be quantified. How the new term and system is used is up to the user.

GLOSSARY

Snub: treat with disdain or contempt, especially by ignoring; failing to notice or pretending not to see (verb). An affront, a slight, or a rebuff (noun).

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REFERENCE

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