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Crack Open the Make Believe: Counterfeit, Publication Ethics, and the Global South

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My chapter joins the conversation on metrics and misconduct via the concept of "counterfeit." The research context of my short intervention draws on ethnographic and archival work, engaging the question of how people experience but also imagine legality/illegality. Since 2010, as part of my interest in the category of "publication ethics," I have been conducting ethnographic observations of the quarterly forum of the global charity Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). My research also looks at how the category of "research misconduct" has taken form in the context of disciplinary adjudication by regulators (Jacob, 2014, 2016a) and of modern patterns of documentation more generally (Jacob, 2017). In brief, I am as much interested if not more in institutional watchdogs of academic misconduct than I am in alleged perpetrators of academic misconduct. Pausing over the mutually exclusive dichotomy of real versus counterfeit journals, my short intervention approaches the idea of counterfeit by way of making three points in relation to public harm and denunciation, the idea of the authentic, and watchdogs. Through these anchor points, I hope we can better see the eruption of counterfeit scientific journals as more inexorable than strange or outrageous. The idea here is not to justify the counterfeit of academic journals by claiming that counterfeit exists elsewhere; it is also not to exoticize or, worse, romanticize counterfeiters. Rather it is to examine it on its own terms, from the point of view of its craft, and to highlight dexterity as one of its most underexplored aspects. As James Siegel has beautifully shown in his ethnography of counterfeiters in contemporary Indonesia (Siegel, 1998), there exists a certain power in making fake university certificates, or fake divorce certificates, and so on. Aside from being about the financial profit it brings, it is a power for crafting "a sort of authority for one's self" or "one's own rubber stamp" and for attesting to one's creative abilities. Given the transformations of scientific research and publishing over the last thirty years, described extensively in the editors' introduction and other chapters to this volume (see Wouters, chapter 4, Gingras, chapter 2, and de Rijcke and Stöckelová, chapter 7, in particular), counterfeit might not be as perplexing as some would like to believe. As I hope to show, it is a rather predicable response, as it is a power that does "make do" and does make things move on for one's self or for others (see Craciun, 2012).

Public Harm and Denunciation

Breaches of research integrity are conceived to have wide-ranging negative consequences for the trustworthiness of science and the health of the public. I do not wish to reiterate or question this view here. By large, my current ethnographic fieldwork on watchdogs of scientific misconduct suggests that this threat of public harm is a key argument that inspires much of the professionalized labor deployed against conduct that gets perceived as incompetent or fraudulent. This threat is assumed rather than demonstrated, but this does not mean that the watchdogs' claims are simple. They are rather complex and sophisticated in their forms, using various registers such advocacy and lobbying, expert discourse, the use of "technologies of integrity verification," vigilantism, and uncovering or hoax to convey their message (Jacob, 2015).

We can unpick the claims of public harm and how these are being deployed in academic misconduct debates through examining the "uncovering" work of watchdogs and journalists targeting so-called "predatory journals." This work exposes the problem of predatory journals in a "public service" style, using a revelatory and denunciatory tone on the basis that if predatory journals are unmasked, they will be less of a threat to science and the public good. One cannot help noticing how this uncovering work is also often performed with humor, and elicits mocking laughter on the part of its audience. The work is meant to ridicule counterfeiters; to inform, but also to make us laugh. As I will explain below, this mocking mode is not innocent, as it automatically grants moral and intellectual superiority to the author of the revelation. Some critiques of this uncovering work see it as a frontal attack on open access, but it also more broadly bashes a scientific subpolity, a subaltern ecosystem within the Global South whose actors attempt to play the metrics game too and do so by mimicking the successful model brand of science.

Take for example the piece of investigative journalism "Who's Afraid of Peer Review" (Bohannon, 2013). The punchy Bohannon article is based on an elaborate hoax concocted by the author, in which a spoof article was submitted and accepted to dozens of open-access journals, thus exposing deficient peer-review practices. The piece bashes the Global South in its explanation of the very making and preparatory work of the sting itself—for instance, an African-sounding name was deliberately used as pseudonym to add credibility to the fake paper.[1] Bohannon's piece also mocks well-established Western scientists from elite institutions who attempt to double-dip, that is, to gain benefits—credit, credentials, lines in the CV—from both the model science and the subpolity of counterfeit journals.

Stings like this expose an alternative ecosystem that has understood very well that one of the most valuable currencies here is precisely what is copiable, what can be slotted in and read into a CV (to be noticed but not necessarily read), and what makes one "make do": the names and the brands of science. Recent research has demonstrated what sorts of currency fake journals produce (Xia et al., 2015). More so, it has debunked assumptions about which "public" or audience is addressed by the fake journals sounding like real journals, and to what extent they harm this public: Jingfeng Xia and his colleagues show that the target audience of these journals is not mainly comprised of readers, users, and stakeholders in the ordinary sense of the words—but rather decision makers within Global South institutions where individual counterfeiters live and hope to "make do," that is, to make a living by keeping their job.

We can illustrate the point further by looking at an analogy from the context of state making. In her study of the make-believe state, Yael Navarro-Yashin (2012) notes that a "wannabe" state has to produce documents to look and act like a state, in other words to perform the state. The entity Navarro-Yashin refers to is not recognized as such under international law: the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Yet tax office, electricity unit, and immigration office documents all carry its logo. These printed logos "do not only represent specific identities and transactions, but also declare legitimacy of the TRNC. They work within the make-believe state, but are not considered legal (and therefore 'real') outside of this self-declared polity" (Navarro-Yashin, 2012). This last sentence points to the currency and leverage of "wannabe" documentation. The TRNC logos echo the point about the effects of counterfeit journals beyond their own polity: counterfeit journals, like the "wannabe" documentation illustrated by Navarro-Yashin, have a more local and affective than large-scale impactful existence. Yet Western Euro-American fears about these journals remain palpable, and the uncovering work helps satisfy the appetite for denunciation, using a form that is easily identifiable to scientists such as the hoax.

In addition, in order to unravel what the allegedly public and harmful nature of counterfeit is made of, there is urgent need for ethnographic engagement in trying to understand the mechanisms of this affective and performative documentation work that is termed as predatory, *on their own terms*. Researchers looking for inspiration for such a mode of engagement and response may wish to look into recent work that blends art history with ethnography. For instance, Winnie Wong has examined Chinese Dafen "copyist" painters as they navigate a world where Western art is at once the gold standard and a commodity (2015). In Wong's work, Chinese hand-painted art products are observed ethnographically, and creators taken seriously for their craft and what they say about it, without moral judgment and without the filters of highbrow conceptual artists who unwillingly end up exoticizing them. What we find out through this engagement is that the privileged categories of originality, uniqueness, and authenticity are far more contingently constructed than we may think. In turn, the work that we associate with "fake art," that is, of manually copying, repetitively, and for pay, has in fact a lot in common with global contemporary art production in general. I can only surmise here, but given the current conditions of competitive, globalized science, it is not impossible that the actual activities of counterfeiters have more in common with those of "real scientists" that we can imagine.

Voices from the Global South also have to be included in policy research and policy-making debates on academic misconduct. Terms and themes engaging directly the Global South are almost completely absent from the conversation, including this book. Exceptions include Sarah de Rijcke and Tereza Stöckelová's contribution to the present volume, as they pointedly refer to the divide between the "international" West or North on the one hand and a "parochial" East or South in academic and publishing markets (de Rijcke and Stöckelová, this volume, chapter 7). When we think about issues such as public interest/public harm in research integrity, we have to reflect carefully about this divide and its distributive justice dimension. Science has a long history of translating "Third World people and their interests into research data within Western capitalist paradigms" (Escobar, 2011). Yet transnational and postcolonial critiques have not yet managed to infuse the organization, structures, and principles of research and publishing (Fletcher, 2015).

The processes of standardizing and measuring the forms science can take, and the privilege that comes attached to these, cannot be separated from the issue of counterfeit of the brands in science. Recognizing this fact highlights connections between normative good science and an ecosystem of scholarly publications that asserts privilege and exclusion. These connections are spelled out in other chapters of the present book (see de Rijke and Stöckelová).

Returning to Bohannon's sting, we see that the way it unfolded shows that within the scientific milieu, there seems to be a division between proper work of deception and improper work of deception. Bohannon and other authors of scientific media hoaxes, like Alan Sokal or more recently James A. Lindsay, Peter Boghossian, and Helen Pluckrose for instance (see also Lippman, this volume, chapter 21),[2] are perceived by many as being upright, brave deceivers who debunk and offer social criticism of sort, whilst also protecting the public. Interestingly it is assumed that Bohannon himself did not act fraudulently. We can ask at what point does the unmasking work of the denunciators who set traps to catch the improper deceivers become fraud itself? To answer this, it is worth paying attention to the format of the hoax as a strategy to expose fraud, as opposed to being an instance of fraud in itself. Journalist Curtis MacDougall's classic work *Hoaxes* defines the hoax as "deliberately fabricated falsehood made to masquerade as the truth,"[3] and philology attributes its origin to *hocus*, "to cheat."[4] The hoax can only work as a hoax if its author decides at the appropriate point in time to self-disclose and let others in. This temporality is critical, and the author of the hoax needs to maneuver it carefully, for the hoax would not work if it were its victims or a third party who would discover the plot. In cases where someone other than the author would reveal the hoax, its author could be considered as having committed deception, or fraud, just the same. Rhetorically speaking, there is no categorical demarcation between hoax and outright fraud, argues Lynda Walsh (2006). Whilst the hoaxer may be motivated by the desire to enact social criticism rather than rip people from their money or status, the authors of both hoax and fraud derive professional, reputational, or financial benefits, and inflict damage on their victims: wasting their time, causing reputational harm by depicting them as gullible, unprofessional, or vain (Walsh, 2006). Rereading the famous Sokal hoax with the tale of the emperor's new clothes, Walsh notes that the author of the hoax, Alan Sokal, demonstrated a desire to be seen as the canniest character, like the tailors. If the duped editors and peer reviewers of *Social Text* are cast as the emperor, whose vanity prevented candid admission of not understanding the article Sokal submitted, in this saga, Sokal self-posed as the clever and brave trickster who can tell us all how things really stand.

Looking at the "Authentic"

My second point is very simple and takes its cue from the previous chapter by Finn Brunton: in addition to creating welcomed opportunities for counterfeiters, the practice of counterfeiting also benefits those who are copied. Counterfeiting solidifies the "template" of elite science and keeps it intact; in other words, by reinforcing the value and prestige of the model, it often is "the sincerest form of flattery" (Mazzarella, 2015).[5] In our context, counterfeiters possibly contribute to sustain the structures of mainstream science by keeping them intact and off the radar whilst our scrutiny targets the counterfeiters. Further, through distinguishing themselves from the counterfeiter, the counterfeited—the elite journal, conference, or organization—accumulates further symbolic capital, as Adrian Johns has pointed out in his study of piracy (Johns, 2010). Therefore, the big challenge for the counterfeited is not quite identity theft as much as recuperating all that otherness, that externality associated with the counterfeiter, and using it tactically.

For watchdogs, including regulators and ethicists, the target remains the pirate, the predator, or the parasite. Whilst concerned with hunting misconduct, watchdogs pay less attention to the systemic features of the mainstream science on which the counterfeit models itself. Counterfeiters (and hoaxes, for that matter) often invite sustained scrutiny into the details and histories of relations and of hidden maneuvers. In the art world as much as in the scientific world, the work of copying is almost always condemned because it is not creative, not transformative or innovative, not critical, but a mere reiteration (Wong, 2013; Hayden, 2010). It is either feared as harmful or dismissed as useless. It is often mocked precisely because of the *modesty* inherent in this form of engagement. It is a "bad copy."[6] These get foregrounded when one examines counterfeiting, but relations are not dissected symmetrically when it comes to mainstream science.[7] Some of these relations are made explicit in Sergio Sismondo's contribution to the present volume (chapter 9; see Aldersey-Williams, 2005; Sismondo, 2009).

Let me illustrate further with an example from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) Forum where (anonymized) allegations of breach of publication ethics get aired and debated amongst journal editors. Participants often state that they face a dilemma and thus have to choose between two potential goals: either solving disputes between authors/editors or maintaining the integrity of the "research record." In the former case, questions are asked about research funding and institutional arrangements. Uncovering the relations and processes that occur before and behind the publication of the paper in question is thought to be critical. "'Publication ethics' does not come out of nowhere," a COPE governing member says, acknowledging explicitly that in order to "do" publication ethics by way of helping resolve a dispute between authors, one has to take stock of a composite of different persons and roles as well as institutions, some legitimated and some less. For instance, different forms of authors, including guest or honorary, ghost, external consultant, medical writer, and student, operate within structures where the line between pure academic work and market-driven research may no longer exist (Rabinow, 1996), but where hierarchical lines of authority between established professors, domestic and international, English-speaking and non–English-speaking PhD students, and early-career and experienced scholars still hold sway. This unpacking takes place when the COPE members discuss authorship dispute. However, when discussions deal with cases of alleged falsification or fabrication of data, participants tend to construct the research record as a self-contained object, and emphasize the need for maintaining its inherent integrity. In these cases, the "research record" is made into an object, detached from, but possibly threatened by, supposedly external personal relations or histories. If the research record is threatened by misconduct, it can, in turn, be restored as a standalone object. My research shows that this process of restoration reifies the research record, isolates it from human relationships (between authors, or between authors and editors) and, in turn, makes these relations recede in the background (Jacob, 2019).

So publication ethics watchdog organizations like COPE struggle to get the full picture when it comes to counterfeit and to mainstream science, but like most other players in the milieu, they are also stuck, albeit unwillingly, in the loop that links together authentic and counterfeit.

Ethics Can Be Counterfeited Too

The publication ethics and research integrity movement demands authenticity within a system that has conflicting demands over value. In many ways and as this book makes explicit, the ecology of science, by demanding both quality and high quantity from players (academic authors), drives the demand for fake. So watchdogs are extremely busy. Reflecting upon the tension between fake and authentic, and the regulatory activities this tension entails, leads me to another analogy from outside of scientific publishing: the consumer movement's response to the market in faked goods in China.

Anthropologist Susanne Brandtstädter has researched a citizen-led movement that acts as a sort of watchdog against counterfeit products in China. Brandtstädter's intriguing work shows that "value" as quality and authenticity is itself also a currency that can be accumulated, invested, and distributed (2009). The contradiction of demands—*demands for fake* and *demands for true value by the consumers* in China—means that local stall owners now aim to cater to both by producing a fake Gucci bag that looks real, but importantly, that also comes with a fake certificate of authenticity (2009). Similarly, certifications and signatures are a big part of the added value of Dafen hand-painted art products (Wong, 2013). But why is this observation interesting for our thinking about publication ethics watchdogs? It means watchdogs' brands are also at the risk of being counterfeited. Certifications of "ethics," "authenticity," and "integrity" have become templates that can become vulnerable as such. This is not unique to publishing since "ethic" is a fruitful template to replicate, in many areas (ethical certification is used for organic food and fair trade, for example).

COPE, for instance, aims to provide an example of good practice and professionalism within publishing. The example it provides is activated through material objects like its flowcharts, newsletters, and, of course, its logo. Its logo is a mark, a kind of certification with its own aura, which itself can be counterfeited. To preserve the authentic nature of its name and logo, COPE recently transformed its logo into multiple personalized logos that each contains a unique number, now available for download by their genuine, fee-paying registered members—out of painstaking concern for preserving a brand of "authenticity" that is vulnerable.

Brand names allegedly "concern the need to provide information to consumers/readers/citizens efficiently about the unobservable qualities of the product that is being sold" in order to assist decision making (Copeman and Das, 2015). But of course they do more than that: brand names try to create markets for products (Mazzarella, 2015). Any product. With this unavoidably comes the mimetic ability to copy the name and use it for an inferior product, or to take a similar-sounding name and thus to steal a part of the name and the market share (Copeman and Das, 2015). What is most crucial to recognize here is the inevitability rather than exceptionality of the eruption of counterfeit scientific journals. It is unhelpful to see the "make believe" as anomalous.

Notes

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1. John Bohannon explains: "My hope was that using developing world authors and institutions would arouse less suspicion if a curious editor were to find nothing about them on the internet."

2. The Sokal affair refers to a scientific publishing hoax perpetrated in 1996 by professor of mathematics Alan Sokal. Sokal submitted a nonsensical article entitle "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards an Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" to the academic journal of cultural studies *Social Text*. With this submission, he wanted to conduct an experiment to test the journal editors' rigor and to see whether the article could get published. The article did not undergo peer review but was accepted by the editors and published in *Social Text*'s special issue on the science wars. On the day of publication, Sokal wrote a piece in *Linga Franca* disclosing the hoax. The hoax triggered many debates within and beyond academia on publishing ethics, postmodernism, and rigor in the humanities. In 2018 Lindsay, Boghossian and Pluckrose conducted a hoax on what they call grievance studies scholarship and peer-review process. The hoax has been called Sokal Squared in reference to Sokal's hoax.

3. Curtis MacDougall, *Hoaxes*, Dover, 1958.

4. Robert Nares, 1822, "A Glossary; or, Collection of Words Which Have Been Thought to Require Illustration in the Works of English Authors," London: Robert Triphook.

5. The proliferation of counterfeits may divert some customers away from the authorized product while at the same time heightening the prestige of "the real thing" (Mazzarella, 2015).

6. Cori Hayden, 2010, "The Proper Copy," *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3(1):85–102.

7. See Bruno Latour, 1991, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, Paris: La Découverte.

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