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Collaborative Manipulations

Collaborative Manipulations analyzes how the pressure to “have impact or perish” helps to spread gaming practices on a global scale while also turning them into collaborative and even institutional practices. The dissemination, institutionalization, and increasingly collaborative nature of these gamings create unforeseen consequences, including the remarkably innovative and ever-changing nature of these manipulations. In addition to the peer review and citation rings mentioned above, these trends may be exemplified by researchers who collaborate with pharmaceutical industries to lend their names to ghostwritten articles in order to “harvest” their numerous citations without lifting much of a finger, or, in other cases, by universities that provide cash bonuses to professors who publish in top journals, which in turn help the university climb in the international rankings.

Barbara Kehm discusses why universities dedicate significant resources to improve their global university ranking, and how a high-ranking university may come to be treated as a nation’s “indicator for the scientific and technological capacity and productive efficiency.” As governments often make educational reforms and funding decisions based on the global rankings of their universities, we see how the compounded effect of impact-seeking publication strategies by many individual authors trickles up to the institutional and then national level, eventually causing global effects—and gaming opportunities.

In a similar vein, Sarah de Rijcke and Tereza Stöckelová argue that the European research policies’ focus on a publication’s “international impact” as a stand-in for quality ends up reinforcing hierarchies between the “international” North and the “parochial” South. This problematic divide, however, can lend itself to gaming. Because universities’ rankings benefit from prolific faculty who publish internationally, these institutions tend to be slow disciplining the faculty who have published in journals

that, although possibly originating from the Global South and appearing in the now-defunct Beall's list of "predatory journals," can still be counted as "international." Universities often turn an equally blind eye, for very much the same reason, when their faculty list fictional "international" co-authors on their publications, or boast to serve on editorial boards of questionable but "international" journals.

Focusing on a different type of publication/academic pressure, Daniele Fanelli makes the convincing argument that co-authorship is, effectively, a kind of collaborative gaming, or at least a gaming that hinges on collaboration. In response to publication pressures from the university, scientists co-author articles with more and more authors so as to match higher productivity benchmarks. Rather than "salami-slicing" their research into multiple publications, scientists "salami-slice" their collaborations. As papers become increasingly co-authored, individual scientists can list more papers on their vitae.

Sergio Sismondo examines a different kind of "authorship gaming," one with two players driven by two very different but compatible sets of goals. Pharmaceutical companies attribute ghostwritten articles to willing and influential scientists—a practice that gives the article the "veneer of having been written by independent researchers, instead of by a coordinated industry team." This allows pharmaceutical companies to publish articles that are carefully crafted to advertise their drugs and yet appear under the guise of legitimate scientific publications. The "authors," on the other hand, receive credit for publications they have not authored but that, due to their high production quality and the professional handling of submissions and revisions by professional writing companies, have a higher acceptance rate, shorter time to publication, and more citations than comparable articles written by independent academics.

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Gaming the Metrics

Misconduct and Manipulation in Academic Research

Edited by: Mario Biagioli, Alexandra Lippman

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