

IV

Mimicry for Parody or Profit

Mimicry for Parody or Profit looks at fakeries (and critiques thereof) that are rooted in “brand appropriation,” parody, and hoax. For instance, fake universities that sell degrees without any attempt at educating (not even online) tend to assume Ivy League–sounding names. What we see are attempts to mimic a “brand” (of a university or a journal), down to the look of their websites, rather than just copying or pirating a specific product (like an article). (See also the mimicking of journals in Ike Antkare’s chapter above). It is only fitting that some critiques of these spammish mimicries are humorous mimicries themselves, like submitting computer-generated articles that mimic the academic genre, creating fake scientists with funny names to author fake articles to make fun of the arbitrariness of citation evidence, or joining spammish editorial boards under comic aliases to expose them.

Drawing from his research on the cultural history of spam, Finn Brunton asks why some new journals that mimic well-established journals are called “spam journals,” while also analyzing how the “spammishness” of so-called spam journals is different from classic spam. Looking at both the beneficiaries and the victims of spam journals, Brunton suggests that—as with other forms of spam—the answer is more complex than it seems. Are the junior professors, the overworked adjuncts, or the scholars from resource-poor universities who publish in spam journals victims or happy customers? Similarly, are the established publishers from the global North to be taken at face value when they accuse these “spam” journals of discrediting the whole system of scholarly publishing (and their “good” journals in it)? Or are they instead benefiting from the existence of these “spam” venues that allow them to construe their journals as “good” by simply contrasting them with the so-called spam ones? The answer is largely in the eye of the beholder, whether one falls (or pretends to fall) for the mimicry, or rides with the mimicry to create the effect of an original.

Marie-Andrée Jacob too dwells on the constitutive tension between the original and the counterfeit: “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.” Unlike Brunton, however, she does not pursue the *cui bono?* question as a window on how the relation between the original and the copy can be construed as either one of opposition or identity. To her, the original and the counterfeit are always already mutually constitutive and they can be either collapsed or teased apart only through much labor and dexterity. Even a publication misconduct watchdog like COPE has to watch out for the appropriation of its trademark.

Alessandro Delfanti shows how mimicry in academic publishing does not need to be driven by a desire for profit, or by an attempt to emulate, but may be adopted as a critical, even subversive, gesture. His example concerns viXra.org, a new fully open science preprint server whose name is the mirror image of arXiv.org, the almost legendary preprint server housed at Cornell. (The layout of the viXra.org site is also virtually identical, minus the color palette and the Cornell University logo, to the arXiv.org site). But unlike the newly developed bioRxiv.org server aimed at providing the life sciences with a service comparable to what physicists and mathematicians had in arXiv.org—a partial “mimicry” that bioRxiv meant as gesture of appreciation of its older “ancestor”—viXra.org wants to “shadow” arXiv.org to make a pointed critical statement: “The visual design of viXra.org (but not its content) is a parody of arXiv.org to highlight Cornell University’s unacceptable censorship policy. ViXra is also an experiment to see what kind of scientific work is being excluded by the arXiv.”¹ Obviously, viXra does not wish to mislead authors into uploading papers on their site believing that it is arXiv’s, but rather to make a statement that viXra is the “good” server by virtue of being the reverse mirror image of arXiv.org, which they criticize for having introduced vetting practices that exclude amateur scientists and other authors who do not happen to have a “proper” institutional affiliation. Mimicry, in this case, expresses a distinctly ad hominem criticism, a parody so specific to its target that ends up assuming its same (albeit reverse) look. (One could say that viXra participates in the carnivalesque discourse of inversion in the sense that it presents itself, literally, as arXiv upside-down.)

Alexandra Lippman explores the carnivalesque in the ways in which the watchdogs and pranksters mock spammish journals. Seeking a laugh, these pranksters create academic paper generators, humorous blogs,

hoaxes, and pseudonymous personae to reveal the lack—or poor quality—of review on the part of what they see as predatory journals and conferences. This, however, is a rather unusual kind of carnivalesque that, unlike the traditional form studied by Mikhail Bakhtin, does not target authority but rather pokes fun at the fraudsters.

Notes

1. <http://vixra.org/why>.

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/11087.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11087.001.0001)

Gaming the Metrics

Misconduct and Manipulation in Academic Research

Edited by: Mario Biagioli, Alexandra Lippman

Citation:

Gaming the Metrics: Misconduct and Manipulation in Academic Research

Edited by: Mario Biagioli, Alexandra Lippman

DOI: [10.7551/mitpress/11087.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11087.001.0001)

ISBN (electronic): 9780262356565

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2020

This title is freely available as an open access edition thanks to the TOME initiative and the generous support of the University of California, Davis. Learn more at openmonographs.org



The MIT Press

© 2020 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND license.



Subject to such license, all rights are reserved.

This title is freely available as an open access edition thanks to the TOME initiative and the generous support of the University of California, Davis. Learn more at openmonographs.org.

This book was set in Sabon by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Biagioli, Mario, 1946- editor. | Lippman, Alexandra, editor.

Title: Gaming the metrics : misconduct and manipulation in academic research / edited by Mario Biagioli and Alexandra Lippman.

Description: Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, [2020] | Series: Infrastructures | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019010150 | ISBN 9780262537933 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Scholarly publishing—Corrupt practices. | Learning and scholarship—Corrupt practices. | Research—Corrupt practices. |

Communication in learning and scholarship—Moral and ethical aspects.

Classification: LCC Z286.S37 G36 2020 | DDC 070.5—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019010150>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1