

Letter to the Editor: Evidence of Bias, Opacity and Lack of Reciprocity by Retraction Watch

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Dear *KOME* Editors,

Retraction Watch (<http://retractionwatch.com>) is a highly popular blog that claims to examine retractions, but is much more than this: it is a central hub that shames science and scientists under the guise of holding them to extremely high research or publishing standards. It primarily examines topics, scientists, editors and publishers in a highly critical light, seeking to accumulate evidence of science's overall failures and misconduct. Retraction Watch also covers other publishing-related topics of general interest but that fall out of its specific and stated scope of retractions. Even pure errors are often shed in a negative light by applying an only-perfection-is-tolerable approach. Being profiled at Retraction Watch, which involves an examination of the flaws or cracks in accountability, transparency, honesty and values in scientists, editors and publishers to build upon their blog stories, may result in psychological and professional damage to those who are profiled. The founders, Ivan Oransky and Adam Marcus, who are self-proclaimed and highly acclaimed editors and science/medical writers and/or journalists, seem to believe that they need not be held as accountable as the entities they publicly profile, even if these are their critics. As a result, a strongly biased, yet powerful, blog has now emerged that specializes in profiling and public shaming of science and scientists. Lack of accountability, transparency, honesty, scientific values, opacity and reciprocity – phenomena that are also beginning to be detected with this popular blog – are some of the reasons that underlie the loss in trust and respect in science and publishing, and these are topics worthy of scrutiny and a fair, frank and open discussion. Such a conversation should take place when the Retraction Watch moderators do not pose any conflicts of interest, or bias. If Retraction Watch purports to be aiding in the assistance of science and higher education through an understanding of retractions, but is unable to focus exclusively on retractions, and fails to be independently moderated, or held accountable by scientists or other members of the public, also shows characteristics of opacity, and fails to hold itself to the same values as it holds its journalistic targets, then one must question the academic and educational merit of this

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Conflict of Interest: The author is not associated with any academic institute, blog or web-site. The author was profiled multiple times, often with issues unrelated to retractions, by Retraction Watch.

blog. This letter to the editor serves to question the core *modus operandi* of the Oransky and Marcus blog, Retraction Watch, namely public shaming.

Dr. Oransky is the co-founder of Retraction Watch. The Center for Science Integrity (CSI; <http://retractionwatch.com/the-center-for-scientific-integrity>) is the stated parent organization of Retraction Watch, although no background information exists about the CSI on this page. The CSI is a registered charity, i.e., a non-profit (501(c)) organization. To date, the CSI has received generous funding from two foundations (MacArthur Foundation; <https://www.macfound.org>; Laura and John Arnold Foundation; <http://www.arnoldfoundation.org>) and one trust, The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust (<http://www.helmsleytrust.org>), which have donated US\$830,000. Very basic information about how this sizeable funding has been or is being used by the CSI and Retraction Watch was just released on November 29, 2016 (McCook 2016), but requests to Dr. Oransky, who is the stated President of the CSI, for details about some of the US\$ amounts on that 2015 tax return¹ remain unanswered, although we have learned the following from that financial disclosure: a) CSI is operated from Dr. Oransky's apartment; b) The full name of the CSI is in fact Center for Science Integrity Inc. but the "Inc." part has been left off the name in all public sites that list or refer to the CSI; c) only just over \$33,000 have been used exclusively for the development of the retraction database in this fiscal year; d) Adam Marcus is the CSI secretary. Such information is important because scientists and the public expect full openness and transparency from the Retraction Watch leadership, Oransky and Marcus, especially regarding a potential US\$830,000 conflict of interest. This expectation is not unreasonable considering that Retraction Watch equally expects the scientific community to be open, honest and transparent about issues related to retractions. As it currently stands, there is an imbalance in opacity and transparency regarding the CSI and the financials of this charity. Is, for example, a goal of the CSI to use any of this funding to instill a culture of fear, *ad hominem* profiling and public shaming, which is strongly suggested by a recent blog post (Oransky and Marcus 2016) by these two science watchdogs? Prof. Susan T. Fiske, the former President of the American Psychological Society, has presented valid arguments and concerns about the culture of shaming in science (Fiske 2016). What then differentiates Retraction Watch from Fiske's concerns? The answer may lie in a constructive (positive criticism and a balanced perspective) versus a destructive (purely negative analysis and anti-science) ideology.

If Oransky and Marcus believe that public shaming is a valid form of argument, then they too, in a true spirit of accountability and reciprocity, must be publicly shamed when and where necessary, by scientists or by members of the public, for valid issues related to their blog, and their public statements and views, including those on Facebook posts, Tweets or other social media or interviews. In much the same way that scientists are held accountable by their peers and by their seniors in editorial positions, and also now by Retraction Watch and other science watchdogs (Teixeira da Silva 2016a), so too must Retraction Watch and its staff not be immune to criticism or humiliation, nor should they be exempt from fair and critical analysis that seeks greater transparency and that holds them more accountable. If Retraction Watch (i.e., Oransky, Marcus and its small fleet of writers) fails in its journalistic standards, if it abuses the publishing medium to modify information without formal public notice (e.g., Teixeira da Silva 2016b), uses intimidation or aggression, abuses the trust of their readership or public, or shows double standards that are incompatible with the standards that they hold scientists, editors and publishers to, then are these not all issues worthy of being explored, and exposed, when necessary? A first case has documented title and content manipulation, without appropriate (or insufficient) error correction (or retraction) by Retraction Watch (Teixeira da Silva 2016b).

¹ <http://retractionwatch.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2015-990.pdf> (last accessed: December 2, 2016)

The CSI does not indicate anywhere on its web-page when it was created, any history about its creation, or its physical or postal address. In fact, the CSI does not have an independent web-page that one would expect for a perceived “Center”, but is instead listed as a sub-menu item of the Retraction Watch web-page, even though the CSI is claimed to be Retraction Watch’s “parent” organization. One would expect, at minimum, that such a prominent, well-funded and high profile ethical center to have its own web-page with full details about all aspects of the organization, including postal address, contact phone and fax numbers, etc., i.e., complete accountability. Sadly, this does not exist. There is no explanation about how, when and using what selective criteria the members of the board of directors² were appointed to this board. When I contacted the CSI directors, the only response I received was from Dr. Elizabeth Wager, the former (2009-2012) COPE (Committee of Publication Ethics) Chair, who claimed not to know the address, nor could she offer any explanation why there is no web-site for the CSI, or what criteria were used to select her to the CSI board of directors. The fact that a director of a board of directors of a self-acclaimed ethical organization is unable to offer any transparent response to such queries is of great concern. It is in fact these factual omissions that should raise scientists’ and the public’s concerns about the failure of Retraction Watch, its senior management and staff, and its board of directors to offer transparent responses about their charity, its functionality, and its *modus operandi*.

Another watchdog, Mr. Jeffrey Beall, an activist librarian with a perceived anti-science (or anti-open access) ideology, lists on his blog, which is regularly featured and promoted (possibly to increase inter-site traffic) by Retraction Watch, primarily on its weekly reads, the following criteria for predatory publishing practices³: “Demonstrates a lack of transparency in publishing operations; Has no policies or practices for digital preservation, meaning that if the journal ceases operations, all of the content disappears from the internet; provides insufficient information or hides information...; the publisher hides or does not reveal its location; The publisher lists insufficient contact information, including contact information that does not clearly state the headquarters location or misrepresents the headquarters location; the publisher uses names such as “Network,” “Center,” “Association,” “Institute,” and the like when it is only a solitary, proprietary operation”. One may thus strongly argue that the opacity surrounding the CSI, its background, constitution, ethical guidelines, scope and *modus operandi*, responsibilities of directors, lack of contacts, physical address and independent web-site fits multiple criteria of the “predatory” concept that Beall alludes to. Should the honesty and lack of transparency (i.e., opacity) of the CSI and of those who have created it, not be called into question?

Finally, none of the Retraction Watch management or staff or CSI directors have any disclaimer or conflicts of interest (COI) listed under their names. Perceived COIs are essential aspects of ethics in science publishing. Such omissions accentuate the overall concern about the ethical basis of this organization. This letter provides evidence that accountability and transparency are not reciprocal concepts for Retraction Watch and its parent organization, the CSI. This ethical exceptionalism fortifies why the CSI needs to be very closely analyzed, scrutinized and monitored.

Higher education would merit from a greater understanding of the issues underlying problems with the literature. Problematic literature is used by students and faculty alike, and thus literature that has errors, has not been correctly vetted, or that is not corrected by editors when errors are known, poses a risk to the core fabric of education. Thus, science welcomes a positive, open, frank and balanced discussion of these issues, but only by an unbiased team of moderators. Blogs and web-sites that purportedly claim to be tools and voices for science and

² <http://retractionwatch.com/the-center-for-scientific-integrity/board-of-directors> (last accessed: December 2, 2016)

³ <https://scholarlyoa.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/criteria-2015.pdf> (last accessed: December 2, 2016)

the education industry, but that lack opacity, such as the CSI / Retraction Watch, may represent more of a danger, and not less, to academic integrity simply because of their contradictory stances.

Science is in a crisis, but there are several issues that undermine the notion that Retraction Watch is being held accountable in a reciprocal manner by the public and by scientists. This false perception has been created by a massively powerful social media presence and the incredible charitable funding offered by three US-based philanthropic organizations. The opacity surrounding the CSI and its workings is a prime example that this perception is not true. In order for there to be mutual respect and exchange of information between Retraction Watch (including the CSI and its board of directors) and the public and/or scientists, with the objective of improving science through open debate and honest and unbiased communication, so too must there be reciprocal analysis, scrutiny, accountability and transparency. It is time to watch science watchdogs like Retraction Watch (Teixeira da Silva 2016a).

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