

The new face of commercial academia: Octopus affiliation

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In academic publishing, the institution to which the author is affiliated is the place where the author publishes/writes about/conducts the research. Author affiliation is an important element in research articles because it provides readers with useful information about where the research was conducted. It is becoming increasingly common for authors to specify more than one affiliation and this is referred to as “octopus affiliation” in the academic world (1). Octopus affiliation is when an author includes in his/her article the institutions to which he/she has more than one affiliation.

An author may have multiple affiliations and all of them may need to be listed in the manuscript to ensure transparency. Moreover, some guidelines or journal style guides may restrict the number of affiliations per author. The American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines allow a maximum of 2 affiliates per author, and the American Medical Association (AMA) guidelines allow a maximum of 1 or 2 affiliates per author, depending on the type of article. Some journal submission systems, such as ScholarOne or Editorial Manager, allow only one affiliate per author. The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association says that only organizations that have made significant contributions to the work should be included (2).

Neither COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics) nor ICMJE (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors) have provided specific recommendations on reporting author relationships.

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University ranking systems, with their publish or perish principle, encourage universities and researchers worldwide to increase their research productivity and publication output without focusing on ethical and scientific content. Authors should only be expected to include links to universities that have contributed significantly to the research conducted and the published article. However, authors and universities may prefer to be at the top of the commercialized world of academia and earn more commercial profits. Institutions offer financial and/or technical support to authors and their contributions are used as indicators of productivity, impact, visibility and prestige at national and international levels. Unfortunately, there is no regular check on author commitment today. Some institutions may tend to somehow 'buy' their labor by offering remuneration, adding their own names to manuscripts that may have originated from the efforts of other universities. Many countries provide public funding to universities based on the number of high-impact articles they publish. In this way, misrepresented affiliations benefit universities through the labor of others.

Affiliations are important for universities that rely on rankings to boost their recruitment and revenue. One way for universities to increase their productivity indicators is to ask authors to include them as an organization. But if this does not accurately represent where the work is done or where the responsibility lies, it becomes a case of gratuity institutional authorship.

If we look at the effects of octopus affiliation on authors in commercial academia, it leads authors to declare institutions or organizations other than the institution where the research is conducted in order to receive more financial support. This leads authors to adapt to the functioning of the commercial academic system and encourages them to publish paid articles at the same time as normalization. It should be recognized that paid article publishing is part of a large commercial network that goes beyond reducing the financial burden of journals and providing financial support. A 2016 study of Scopus-indexed articles investigated all authors who reported multiple institutional affiliations, at least one of which was with a university in Chile. Of the 4,961 author records with multiple links, 38% of the links to a Chilean university could not be verified by checking institutional websites. For-profit private universities had a higher proportion of potentially misrepresented author links (40%) compared to non-profit universities (28%) and public universities (26%) (3). A recent study showed an increase in multiple linking in journal publications, with one in three articles having more than one linked author (4).

As we have already mentioned, the most important steps that can be taken are; to remove academic publishing from the monopoly of large commercial publishing houses, to ensure that items with high commercial expectations of intermediary consultant companies can be met by the labor of board members, to prevent researchers from preferring commercial publishing houses and journals, projects to increase the academic enthusiasm and cooperation of board members and reviewers, and to encourage non-commercial / fundable public or association publishing (5). In addition, international neutral bodies such as COPE or ICMJE should urgently address the issue of octopus authorship and take action to create guidance documents on appropriate and ethical reporting of author affiliations.

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