

A critical review of the role of the editor-in-chief and associate publisher in a case of alleged identity stealing that is more than a dispute between authors

Helmut Schiff

Paul Scherrer Institut, Forschungsstrasse 111, 5232 Villigen PSI, Switzerland

Motivation

During June 2023, two PSI employees found a recent publication in a technical journal by authors of a non-European university (NEU), in which they were listed as co-authors. They did not know about this publication, nor did they know the other authors. The names were linked to nearby ETH Zürich and not directly to PSI. However, there were several points that seemed odd: The ETH *institute did not exist*, and the *two names were linked to the PSI authors via Scopus* not to the NEU. For the two PSI employees it was obvious that their identities were *misused* by the other authors. They immediately reached out to the editor-in-chief (EIC) and the associate publisher (AP), to initiate an immediate retraction of the paper, a removal of their names from the authors list and the Scopus link. The AP acted thoughtful, but overly cautious for a case that seemed crystal clear to both PSI employees and the EIC, claiming that *internal procedures* had to be followed. I will use the case to review the different roles of AP, EIC and authors; in particular, if there was a *lack of communication* and *potential conflict of interest*. Currently, one year after the incident, although promised, the paper is not yet retracted. This situation shows the incapacibilities of the current system and is unacceptable for the PSI researchers.

Identity stealing by faking names

A communication that leaves more question open than it answers

- One of the authors (not the corresponding author) answered to a request by the AP:
- He and the other author with European names were graduating from NEU university, either still (student 1) there or formerly (student 2). **The e-mail address was private.**
 - In 2022, they presumably had "visited" ETH Zürich for three months. They used the ETH affiliation as "recognition" for the paper idea, but **no contact person was named.**
 - He (student 1) claimed to have the **exact same names** as the PSI employees (Czech). Further, he claimed that student 2 had the exact (Italian) name of the PSI employees.
 - These **names were both linked to the Scopus names of the PSI employees, but not to their NEU affiliation.** Both authors seemed to have obtained their bachelors' or masters' degrees by publishing this paper (that apparently was based on experiments), because they claimed that they would potentially lose their degrees if the paper was retracted.
 - After some time, waiting for action by the AP, I (H. Schiff) contacted the corresponding author (CA) and the other co-authors (not the students with the identical names) to ask for clarification about the fact why they were using a Swiss university affiliation without being matriculated at ETH (with the aim to discuss research integrity issues).
 - I got an **answer from student 1, not from CA**, with the same answer as before to the AP, that they were grateful to ETH, but otherwise **inexperienced in writing papers** (claiming *beginner's error*?). When I insisted to get an answer from the CA, not a student, the CA answered but the answer was not different from the original answer.
 - My suggestion, that **presenting identity documents** would facilitate proving of their authorship, **remained unanswered.**

Conclusion: Considering the very low likelihood that two researchers with the same names of rare provenience could be "employed" both, in a Swiss and a NEU institute, the question was what the real "error" was:

- **Issue 1:** Using a prestigious affiliation without having been invited or supervised could be attributed to a *lack of experience*. Even naming ETH in the acknowledgement would have been odd without naming a supervisor/contact person. The fact that the institute was not existing under the exact name could be an *honest error*. **BUT: Why was this not handled by the CA, obviously a young researcher with a solid output of papers?**
- **Issue 2:** Stealing identities to facilitate the review process must be considered as clear fraud. This could have been clarified by a *simple proof of identity*, which – obviously – the AP did not request or get. The two students were not registered in ORCID with no track record, nor had e-mail addresses from NEU. There is no way of forcing authors to disclose their identities, as long as there is no criminal investigation. Students even may not have a contract or are bound by a line-in-command. **BUT: Who was the origin of this fraud? The students, the CA? Or was the CA faking to be a student?**

The authors were adding names to an authors list, to obtain benefits?

- Why were the two names linked to the PSI authors via Scopus (who are not affiliated with ETH, but indirectly linked by their group head, who is professor at the ETH)? When the incorrect Scopus link of student 1 was solved, student 2 was suddenly linked via Scopus. This was solved by notification via the publisher's webpage. In 2024, the same Scopus link appeared again. **This seems to be an automatism issue and a clear mistake by the publisher.** It is a pity that this could not be solved by the AP.
- It is not understandable why the authors chose two (rare) European names. Did this really improve the likelihood to pass the review process? Was this done deliberately, or maybe by choosing names from a paper with similar content? Selecting two authors of the same group could be the result of either, a **naïve behavior, or result of careful selection** of two persons with a good scientific reputation in the ETH domain, **or a proposition by artificial intelligence (AI)** that may have been used to aid writing the manuscript. Since NEU was specialized in "computer science and automation", there is reason that the authors were proficient in using AI.
- If the names were "Smith" or "Carpenter", it would have been much more difficult to find the obvious false link to the PSI authors. They were upset, but not in a position to act against the other authors with the same names unless they did not have a proof.

NOTE: In this poster, since the process is not concluded and proof cannot be provided, the names of the persons involved (student 1+2), the affiliation (NEU), the journal and editors are not disclosed. This will be done during the presentation upon request.

The acting persons and their (in)ability to act

Acting persons

Researchers @ PSI

- Did not know about the paper until they found it linked to their Scopus account.
- Asked for immediate retraction via EIC, which is the most natural thing to do.
- Did not want to contact "criminal" authors from a publication they considered as fake.
- Asked AC to remove the Scopus link, better directly online via the publisher's network.
- Could not accelerate the process. Getting timely and precise answers was difficult.
- Although reputation damage might be limited, fast reaction would have been beneficial.
- Informed colleagues and superiors that (all) asked to put pressure on the EIC (and AC).

Editor-in-Chief (EIC) @ Journal

- Sided with authors, asked for immediate retraction, but was not available due to travelling (sabbatical in remote country?) and instable WiFi connection, no backup!
- Seemingly did not have the power to accelerate, moderate the process.
- Threatened to leave EIC position if AC would not act but did not do so.

Associate publisher (AC) @ Journal

- Was "managing" the case, but frequently unavailable.
- Wanted to solve the case as "authors' dispute", fearing conflict and backlash (shitstorm).
- Wrote letters to authors for clarification, even offered visit to NEU.
- Was linked to the NEU (potential conflict of interest), did not want to lose potential authors for future submissions, seemingly was already involved in another conflicts.
- Admitted that fake authors did (probably) not exist or were not working at NEU
- Initiated retraction (after several requests), had no power to accelerate process.

Journal/Publisher

- Stayed anonymous – no localization, no line-of-command, no COPE-representative.
- Online removal of Scopus link worked out upon request by me or authors.
- Linking of Scopus link was the major source of error – re-linking should be avoided.

Consultant research integrity @ PSI (H. Schiff)

- Was taking over the case with the aim to create direct communication with EIC and AC.
- Did not have the power to accelerate the process. Aim: Cooperation with CA.
- Was never linked to a COPE representant but left alone with "promise" from the AC.
- Upon direct contact with NEU authors, did not get additional information.
- Felt helpless with regards to communication with PSI authors and colleagues who demanded fast fix of the case – even by threatening to place a story!

Authors of the paper in question @ NEU (Non-European University)

- A student was acting as main link, even when the corresponding author was contacted.
- The other authors did not respond, there was no obvious principal investigator (CA?)
- Their strategy was lying, negation, claiming honest error, not knowing rules.
- Students were not affiliated, findable, traceable (e-mail, group, ORCID), did not provide documents, name of supervisors @ NEU or @ ETH.
- The NEU webpage did not allow for finding responsible persons, line managers, no contact for research integrity.

Conclusion: How should we see this case?

- **Question 1:** What is the reason of fraud (stealing identities)? At NEU, do even students need a paper to get their degrees? Did the CA need publications to advance her career (it seems that in 2023 the CA published every month). Having authors from reputed institutes enhances impact in the reviewing process and visibility. **Wrong incentives!**
- **Question 2:** What is the scale of fraud? Is this a beginner's error, a new phenomena or a papermill? Do students (or researchers) test such strategies to enhance publication output? Is this known to publishers? **More information about AI-enhanced fraud needed!**
- **Question 3:** Is this a problem on non-European universities that do not follow rules? Would it be appropriate to contact the NEU management to investigate the case? **How to avoid damaging careers of young researchers under pressure who commit errors?**
- **Question 4:** Why did the "system" (AC, EIC, publisher's panel) act so slowly? **It seems that they are were either not willing, capable, fearful to proceed, or simply understaffed.**

Further developments (2024) and expected consequences

- In 5/2024, after one year, the paper is still not retracted. The process is ongoing – AC promised that the paper will be retracted – there is no timeline when this will happen!
- Consequences beyond retraction: Notification of superiors at NEU, (potentially) loss of the students' master degrees and impact on supervisor's/corresponding author's career.
 - The longer the process lasts, the more likely it is that this behavior will go unpunished.
 - The wrong Scopus link that was once "repaired" was created again. If this is automatic, then the publisher is to blame! Authors should maintain control over their track record!

Conclusion

- Authors expect publishers and research integrity officers (internal or COPE) acting as "advocates", who help to open and speed up a case. Misuse of advocacy?
- The publication system beyond publication is lacking transparency, competence in handling cases and willingness to do so. The publishers should be "rewarded" for taking allegations seriously or be supervised by external institutions (COPE?).
- ORCID registration should be mandatory for all researchers, even students.

Author: Dr.-Ing. Helmut Schiff is head of a research group at PSI performing projects in the field of nanofabrication. He is lecturing on micro- and nanotechnology for engineers and has written several book chapters. In 2019, he has become consultant in research integrity at PSI with a focus on education and training of advanced researchers. In 2021, he has obtained a MAS degree in applied ethics at the University of Zürich.



References: <https://www.psi.ch/en/integrity/documents>