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Give researchers a lifetime word limit

Brian C. Martinson *imagines how rationing the number of publications a scientist could put out might improve the scientific literature.*

A dirty truth pervades academic publishing: we write papers to gain credit in an academic marketplace. Almost a quarter of a century ago, academic worthies lamented that scholarly publications had become "the coins academics must use to get through the tollgates on their way to academic promotion" (D. Rennie and A. Flanagin *J. Am. Med. Assoc.* **271**, 469–471; 1994). In some cases, papers in flashy journals truly do bring in hard cash — reportedly more than US$40,000 at some universities in China. And plenty of people reading this will have felt they'd better squeeze a paper or two out soon to have any chance of getting their next grant proposal funded.

The purpose of authorship has shifted. Once, its primary role was to share knowledge. Now it is to get a publication — 'pubcoin' if you will. Authorship has become a valuable commodity. And as with all valuable commodities, it is bought, sold, traded and stolen. Marketplaces allow unscrupulous researchers to purchase authorship on a paper they had nothing to do with, or even to commission a paper on the topic of their choice. 'Predatory publishers' strive to collect fees without ensuring quality.

I have spent much of my career studying how academic and clinical workplaces influence how carefully researchers conduct their studies. The commodification of authorship encourages all manner of corner-cutting, sloppiness in research, and other degradations in the quality of publications, not to mention an obvious motive for plagiarism. A quest for high-profile papers leads researchers to favour a spectacular result, even if it is specious. Authors cite themselves to boost the impact of publications, and cite colleagues to curry favour.

At this point, it is hard even to envisage a world in which the communication of knowledge could return to its rightful place as the focus of academic authorship. But if we cannot imagine something, we cannot attain it. So let me try. Imagine a world in which each scientist is allotted a fixed number of words that they can publish over her or his career. I'm not the first person to suggest this: the Australian writer Michael McGirr has proposed a word limit for every person.

What would happen? Might authorship regain its original purpose?

Lifetime limits would create a natural incentive to do research that matters. Researchers would have to ask themselves, "Is this project I'm pursuing worth the words it will cost me?" I see several articles in my own CV that did not contribute much knowledge to the world. I cannot help but think that I might have pursued better questions had a word limit been in place.

Ideally, limits would encourage researchers to ensure that research is conducted with the utmost care. (Imagine losing part of your allotment of words to a paper that is discredited or even retracted.) This would provide a counterweight to the pressure to publish quickly for priority. It would also lead to increased value being placed on concision and clarity, improving readability and efficiency. Honorary authorship would become much less attractive.

With less time needing to be spent on papers of low quality or containing little new information, readers and editors would be able to give the smaller number of articles more attention. Editorial workload would be reduced by virtue of the lower volume and the higher quality of material. This might reduce editorial costs, enhance quality, and quite possibly enhance the job satisfaction and quality of life of editors and readers. Predatory publishers would vanish.

With a boost in the quality of scientific papers, the communal work of peer review would get easier. Individual researchers would be asked to carry out fewer reviews. Reviewing invitations would be for work of higher quality, making the job more enjoyable and less aggravating. And knowing the stakes for the authors in expending their precious words, reviewers themselves might be inclined to put more time and effort into their reviews, further improving quality.

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The task of evaluating candidates for jobs, advancement and prizes would become less scattershot. With fewer publications per candidate, promotion and tenure committees could become less reliant on tallying counts of first-authored publications, and devote time to reading and critiquing the published work. This, in turn, should reduce their use of journal impact factors as proxies for quality.

Limits would of course bring a new set of problems: if we don't also address our own cognitive biases and penchant for compelling narratives, word limits could exacerbate tendencies to publish only positive findings, leading researchers to explore blind alleys that others' negative results could have illuminated. Researchers might skimp on a full description of caveats, previous work and methods. Some subjects and pursuits might be inherently wordier than others. Exceptions might have to be made for experts such as statisticians and bioinformaticians whose skills are required on many papers — but perhaps this would boost the quality of collaborations. Perhaps researchers could apply for word bonuses for careful reproductions, cautious interpretations and meticulously described methods.

Would these drawbacks be worse than the current incentives to publish as much as you can? We have lost sight of information sharing as the primary reason for publishing. Perhaps my flight of fancy is a rose-tinted remembrance of times past. Or perhaps it can serve as a guide to restore the exchange of ideas to its rightful, pithy, place. ■

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