Description

The claim on the editing service website seemed too good to be true. “You can publish SCI papers without doing experiments!” Unfortunately, this was not a joke. In China there is a thriving business in selling authorships to scientific publications. For as little as $1600 you may buy the right to be listed as a co-first author on a paper of which you did not write a word. Publication is guaranteed. The paper has already passed the first round of reviews. Your name will be added to the final version submitted just before publication.

China’s Publication Marketplace

The competition for publication credits as an aid for advancement in academia makes this sort of fraud inevitable, but nowhere is the problem worse than in China. Researchers desperate for publications are willing to pay high prices for them. Some of these companies are fly by nighters that take the money and vanish but others deliver on their promises.

No Data? No Problem!

Last year Science magazine investigated this business of authorships in China by carrying out a sting operation in which a writer posed as a researcher interested in being listed as an author on a paper accepted for publication. “There are some authors who don’t have much use for their papers after they are published,” the sales rep told the reporter. “They can be transferred to you.” Adding one name would cost $14,800, and adding two names, co-first author and co-corresponding author, was offered at the discounted rate of $26,000. A sales document from the agency promoted the practice: “The heavy labor can be left to us. Our service can help you make progress in your academic path!”

The Science reporter did not buy the authorship, but someone else did. A few months after the agency interview the paper appeared in an SCI rated journal, with a new co-author added. The publishing journal denied any knowledge of fraudulent activity as did the agency, which blamed the incriminating interview on a rogue employee.

Getting Away with It: The Numbers Game

How do agents and researchers get away with this sort of fraud? The main reason is simply a matter of numbers. Chinese publications in SCI journals have soared in recent years, from about 30,000 in the year 2000 to more than 190,000 in 2012. Journal editors don’t have the staff or time to investigate the authenticity of every prospective author. And there are legitimate reasons why new co-authors might be added to a paper in response to revisions prompted by reviewers’ comments. Overwhelmed by a flood of submissions, editors let some questionable additions slip by.

Spotting Fake Editing Companies

Unfortunately, many of the fraudulent agencies that hawk authorships masquerade as legitimate editing services

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. But a reputable editing service doesn't create content for an author; it only makes an author's submitted content more professional and more presentable. Avoid any service that offers to do more.

For more information on selling authorships see the article "China's Publication Bazaar," Science, Vol. 342, 29 November 2013, 1035–1039.

Category

1. Publishing Research
2. Understanding Ethics

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