

Partial extract from the talk by Kim Iles

I will not be discussing the Associates Editors, for many of them are friends and are doing a good job. I will ignore the administrative editors and not pass judgment (today) on their ideas about scientific papers. I would however, like to rip the lungs out of a few copy editors. Their ideas of “proper style” are seldom useful to the reader, and far more frequently are counterproductive. Silly requirements for the author to rewrite to their standards is an annoyance, but not unethical.

Far more serious is the recent tendency to change papers without the authors consent or knowledge. I have run into several of these situations with my own work. You probably have not read your own papers after they are published, assuming that they were what you submitted. You might be in for a surprise. I have found that errors have been inserted, statements garbled, and even direct quotes have been changed. None of us has any doubt that these are genuine attempts to improve our work, but it is absolutely unacceptable for any professional organization to have such a policy. Just what kind of egotistical twits are in charge of changing scientific papers ? Why on earth would it be allowed ? What are we going to do about it ?

This is simple. It is wrong to change an authors paper without their knowledge and consent. It is *more* than professionally discourteous. It is fraud. It is unethical. Anyone who cannot understand this is too stupid to do this kind of work.

Perhaps we simply need to make things clear. The next time you are in charge of a proceedings that will be published, perhaps you need to send the copy editors a short note. Something like this might be appropriate ...

My dear,
much respected,
and beloved,
Ms. Bigglesworth

As general chairman of the conference, I have been notified that you are assigned to do the editing.

I am most pleased. I am sure that we can agree that you are well versed in the realm of grammar and the philosophical use of the semicolon. I am sure that we can also agree that you are the least technically competent person who will *ever* attempt to read any of these papers.

As such, you are incompetent to detect vague and light-handed references to the history or people involved -- let alone inside jokes, technical phrasings, puns or snide comments.

We want to hear the authors voice in these papers, not yours. I personally believe that it is wrong to make an author sound more competent, literate, or better balanced than they are. We live in a world where most opinion must be ignored. It is important to know who has nothing to offer. If they are fools, all the better that it shine through clearly.

However, it is kind of you to want to help them and I understand that. Now I know all these folks personally. I know that they will *appreciate* suggestions that will improve their writing. Suggestions, Ms. Biggleworth, not changes.

You will not personally change one punctuation mark, correct one misspelling, or make anything “more clear”. The author will do that, IF they agree with your suggestions.

If the paper is simply unreadable and hopeless, I will handle that. The author will be hosed off forthwith, and a replacement sought.

If the author takes the words of others and signs his name to them, we both know that this is plagiarism. We don’t need any of that. If you change the authors words and sign that authors name to it, that is forgery, the “uttering of false documents” or at least misdemeanor fraud. We don’t need any of that either.

If you find that you cannot live with this policy restriction then please send me your comments in writing, to be forwarded to the boss of our mutual superior. I will, of course, edit your remarks for tone, content and clarity. You will not be informed of any of my changes, and the letter will bear your signature. I am sure that you would not object to this procedure. Fair is fair, Ms. Bigglesworth.

You can also reach me at Daboss.com

With the greatest affection,
I remain,
Your obedient servant
Blah, blah, blah blah blah

Most of us (probably even all of us added together) will not have the impact upon our field that a Walter Bitterlich or a Lew Grosenbaugh will have. A few of you are blessed to be teachers, and might contribute to the growth of a student. A few of you might have some wisdom to pass onto a young colleague, in the rare cases where you find one willing to accept it.

Most of us will tread lightly upon the ground of our profession, and our tracks will be faint. These slight impressions are pressed into the pages of the publications we leave behind. They should at least be our tracks.