LETTER

"Trust the researchers": flying in the face of evidence

There are always rival hypotheses to explain away the one that is posited as the most likely to be true. Context and Occam's razor – the principle that among competing hypotheses, the one with the fewest assumptions should be selected – ultimately point to which hypothesis is the most likely to be true.

Ian Harris (1) shows his hand when suggesting that Mark Wilson (2) is invoking a "conspiracy theory" to explain the relationship between the editorial and financial staff at the *NEJM*. Organisations usually have a culture that blends their production and financial staff. The CEO is attentive to inputs received from all staff, especially those responsible for keeping track of money. It is far-fetched to suggest that the interactions between a journal editor and the editorial and financial staff when reaching decisions point to some kind of "conspiracy". Occam's razor abhors complicated explanations when the simplest explanation will suffice. Conspiracy theory, indeed!

That said, Ian Harris reveals his bias when he says, "I do not think that the role of journals is to check the data supplied by authors. They may be sceptical in some cases, but at the end of the day, they have to trust the authors; it is not possible for them to check the data contained within each article. We all have to trust the researchers."

"Trust the researchers" . . . now that is fantastical thinking in the face of the avalanche of evidence which demonstrates that researchers are less than trustworthy (3). There is also evidence to suggest that some journal editors provide cover for authors who manipulate their results and report biased findings (4).

Besides, empirical science demands replicability, and how would one be able to replicate without fully knowing the nitty-gritty of the methods and procedures that produce the data on which "findings" are based?

"Trust but verify", the now famous reminder of former US President Ronald Reagan to Mikhail Gorbachev in December 1987 after signing the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, is a better guide to evaluating researchers' claims.

Journals proceed at their own risk if they rely on the trustworthiness of the authors. Why bother to subject a manuscript to peer review instead of simply asking the author to certify "trustworthiness" in some way or the other? Perhaps one could go by an honest face and earnest gaze. To rely on the trustworthiness of an author is a fool's errand, considering the repeated revelations that pharmaceutical companies routinely write reports and recruit high-status academic leaders to lend their signatures to these reports (5).

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