Research integrity corner

What's in a name, anyway?

Farrokh Habibzadeh*

Past President of the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME)
Editor and Founder of the *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (IJOEM)*

*Corresponding author: Farrokh.Habibzadeh@theijoem.com

In prehistoric matrifocal societies, children were identified by their mothers, not their fathers. This did not last long and the era of patriarchy began. Thereafter, people were recognized by their fathers. This shift in genealogy has clearly been reflected in Greek mythology – the defeat of the goddess Gaia and Titans by Zeus and Olympian gods.

We have used names, particularly surnames, to identify people who are related. However, this has been done in various ways in different societies. While in many western countries we use a given (first) name and a surname (family name) to identify a person, in Arab countries, there are in fact no surnames; people use their given name followed by their father's given name. For example, while my name in a western system is "Farrokh Habibzadeh" (Farrokh is my first name and Habibzadeh is my family name), my name in Arabic documents, say in a visa, would be "Farrokh Naser" (Naser is my father's first name). Chinese use another style. They usually use their surname followed by their given name. Then, my name in a Chinese system would be "Habibzadeh Farrokh".

All these varieties in naming a person would cause serious problems, particularly when we need to correctly identify a person. As an example, the very first step in assessing the contribution of a certain person to scientific enterprise is to identify the works done by that particular researcher. Nowadays, using online search systems, it is not difficult to find the articles published by a given author. However, some records belonging to other researchers, for similarity of authors' names are retrieved and factitiously may be counted for the author under question. In some countries, some names are very prevalent and finding two or more people with similar names is not uncommon. Finding out what record really belongs to "who" sometimes is very difficult and time-consuming [1]. Different spelling of names makes the situation even worse – some records may not be retrieved at all by a simple search.

Several proposals to solve this "authority control" issue have so far been proposed. In 2009, we proposed a unique identifier, the so-called "AID", to be assigned to researchers [1]. ORCID [2], Scopus author identifier [3], and PubMed author ID [4] are other examples. All these are meant to assign a unique permanent identifier to every researcher round the globe to be used for identification of each author.

Considering such a broad variation in naming conventions in various cultures throughout the world, I believe that it is fair enough for the editor of an international journal to correctly identify authors of submitted manuscripts and regardless of the naming conventions used, respect the authors' cultural values, and process the manuscript as usual. Of course in this way, the editor may face some limitations. For example, for certain limitations in the journal software system, the editor may not be able to present the name of some authors in the way they prefer to be presented. Under such cir-

cumstances, the editor has a moral duty to make the situation clear enough so that the authors can be identified correctly (in their community) and benefit from their work as much as possible. It is also necessary to note that currently there are limitations for naming authors in international indexing systems such as MEDLINE and Web of Science. In the meantime, authors have adapted to some of these limitations. For example, when submitting a manuscript to a western-based journal, Arab authors, who generally do not have a surname, usually use their given name (the first part of their name) as their first name and their father's name (the second part of their name) as their family name in online submission forms.

Currently, most of the journal online submission systems are asking for an author identifier, mostly ORCID. This data field, though optional today in most journals, will soon become a must-enter field. Different platforms (say ORCID and Scopus author identifier) are united to provide a really unique identifier for each researcher. Currently, many indexing systems also support these IDs to make authors identifiable. However, all these efforts may be useless. An imaginary scenario would happen in near future when management of the very large pile of data accumulated from various sources is not possible by human. Then, artificial intelligence becomes strong enough to collect, compile, and analyse the necessary data, and synthesize a reasonable conclusion. Thenceforward, many things such as the criteria for authorship and the definition of plagiarism would be changed significantly from those we have today (5). Most researchers would then be solely data providers. Then, to be honest, the credit for authorship would (or if I dare to, should) mainly go to an intelligent machine, and I am pretty sure that machine has no problem with its identity because it is then part of a world-wide intelligent computing network.

Potential conflict of interest

None declared.

References

1. Habibzadeh F, Yadollahie M. The problem of "Who". Int Inf Libr Rev 2009;41:61-2. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10572317. 2009.10762799.
2. ORCID. Available at: https://orcid.org/content/about-orcid. Accessed May 1st 2016.
3. Elsevier. Manage My Author Profile. Available at: www.elsevier.com/solutions/scopus/support/authorprofile. Accessed May 1st 2016.
4. Medicine NLo. PubMed Author ID Project. 2014. Available at: www.nlm.nih.gov/pubs/techbull/nd10/nd10_pm_author_id.html. Accessed May 1st 2016
5. Habibzadeh F. Plagiarism: what does the future hold for science writing? Eur Sci Ed 2014;40:91-3.