

Why research papers should not be anonymous?

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I read with interest the opinion piece in *Current Science*¹ entitled ‘Would scientists be willing to write anonymous papers?’. Here I provide my contra opinion to this view. A vital reference not cited in ref. 1 is that of Kronick², who had provided a historical background to anonymity among 18th century scientists, including that of Erasmus Darwin (grandfather of Charles Darwin), Edward Jenner and Benjamin Franklin, as well as the motivations for such anonymity. Even in the recent decades since 1970, scientists have contributed anonymous papers, which have been permitted by editors and journals^{3–10}. Most were related to self-experimentation reports, medical errors and whistle-blowing.

In my view, the opinion piece¹ glosses over the demerits of anonymity of authorship, while extolling a few transparent merits. I provide the following merits in having authors identified openly with their research contributions.

(1) Names offer ornamentation to papers. For example, 26 references are cited in ref. 1. Among these, only the 24th reference is identified as ‘Anonymous, but later known to be Malthus’. The rest of the 25 references contain names, among which the name of P. Balaram (former editor of *Current Science*) appears five times. Suppose, if all the references are merely cited as ‘Anonymous or Anon’, the citations become bland, cumbersome and boring.

(2) Names also offer some degree of authority of status for a viewpoint. The previously cited example of Balaram is apt to illustrate this merit. Reference 5 in the opinion piece¹ is that of R. Horton, the current Editor-in-Chief of *Lancet* journal. If Horton’s name is replaced with ‘anonymous’, the reader will lose the advantage of immediately accessing the wisdom of *Lancet*’s Editor-in-Chief.

(3) Replacing one’s name with ORCID ID is also equally cumbersome. I have an ORCID ID, which is a 16 digit number

(0000-0001-6693-0110). For example, I pick up few cases from ref. 1, from the anonymous which has sentences beginning like: ‘Horton⁵ succinctly pointed...’, ‘Fanelli³ reported...’, ‘Roosendaal and Geurts¹⁵ have often been cited...’. How impractical and ridiculous will it appear, if either anonymous tag or ORCID ID is used to replace the names?

(4) Anonymity also breeds irresponsibility. The *Economist* practices anonymity for authorship, which I dislike. This is because, the reporters who are culturally and linguistically challenged write about themes and current developments in many countries which I know are warped to an extent, because of this anonymity garb they are allowed to wear.

(5) Reporting of discoveries in science worked perfectly well for two-person teams. I list some illustrious examples, where one or both members of the teams were awarded the Nobel Prize. Bragg and Bragg (father and son), Curie and Curie (husband and wife), Banting and Best, Watson and Crick, Brown and Goldstein, Edwards and Steptoe, and Berson and Yalow. How ridiculous it will appear in the future, if anonymity tag (Anonymous and Anonymous) is used to replace these names?

(6) To its defence, the opinion piece¹ cites the splendor of Egyptian temples, Ellora or Thanjavur statues, and Ajanta paintings. Why not extend the inventions beyond the Egyptian temples? How about the anonymity of the inventor of fire, wheel and glass? One plausible reason for anonymity in such cases is that we are unaware of the names of individuals who were responsible for these inventions.

(7) Names are important not for the reason that they ‘offer ornamentation’, but because they direct the attention of readers to who wrote the paper. This is an essential component without which bibliographic details suffer from incompleteness.

(8) Absence of names does not hinder immediately accessing the wisdom of an author whose name is omitted. But, it hides the answer the question ‘whose wisdom?’

On why anonymity was replaced by eponymity in the 19th and 20th centuries, Kronick² inferred that ‘While many authors chose the prerogative of remaining anonymous in the earlier period, the practice rarely occurs today, and when it does, it is not as easily condoned’. This is because, to quote Kronick² again, ‘The social environment of science and scientific journalism has also undergone great changes, in the professionalization of the scientist, the premium placed on publication, the greater emphasis on experimental than on observational data, and so forth’.

Lastly, I do acknowledge the assistance of a reviewer’s positive input (items 7 and 8, mentioned above) to an earlier version of this manuscript.

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9. Anonymous, *Academe*, 2009, **95**(6), 22–25.
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