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Censorship in Science: Deeper Processes

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When submissions to scientific journals are rejected due to bias or service to vested interests, this is a form of censorship. But are there other, deeper, factors causing certain views to be excluded from research agendas?

This issue came to my attention after reading some recent articles about censorship in science. The authors of these articles are especially concerned about censorship driven by race and gender orthodoxies. I'm not so concerned about the rights, wrongs, claims and counter-claims concerning research in this particular area, but rather in deeper processes shaping scientific agendas, processes largely unaddressed in these papers.

After briefly discussing the papers, I will introduce four of these deeper processes: paradigms, suppression of dissent, undone science, and incorporated science.

Three Papers

In 2023, a paper was published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* titled "Prosocial Motives Underlie Scientific Censorship by Scientists." It is authored by Cory Clark and dozens of others, many of them psychologists. They provide a tour of important issues regarding censorship in science, including historical examples, a classification of types of censorship, and how to distinguish censorship from rejection of papers because of low quality. One of their striking assessments is that when scientists censor other scientists, this is often for prosocial reasons, such as the well-being of social groups.

The authors cite a huge number of sources. Many of these are about a particular target for censorship: scientists who challenge today's orthodoxies about race and gender.

This emphasis is more overt in a recent paper titled "Critical Social Justice Subverts Scientific Publishing." The authors, Anna Krylov and Jay Tanzman (2023a), argue that CSJ-inspired censorship, for example via language guidelines, is the greatest threat to science today. Krylov and Tanzman (2023b) also compiled a collection of recent documents on censorship in science. This is a useful source for anyone investigating this topic. It is posted on the blog of the *Heterodox Academy*, an organisation set up, initially in the US, by and for scholars, to promote "the principles of open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement to improve higher education and academic research." Much of the concern by members is about the marginalisation of politically conservative ideas and scholars.

One of the articles in Krylov and Tanzman's list is "Scholarship Suppression" by Sean Stevens, Lee Jussim and Nathan Honeycutt (2020). They provide a fairly general treatment of suppression of scholarship, categorising it as external to the academy, internal (said to be the most severe) or a combination. Nearly all their examples relate to "race, sex, ethnicity, colonialism, etc." (13).

These articles highlight concerns about the silencing of viewpoints contrary to social-justice frameworks concerning race and gender. This is a relatively recent concern. As noted by

Clark et al., in the 1950s in the US, the primary targets of suppression were politically left-wing academics (as well as intellectuals in other fields). But is it fair to say that the greatest threat to scientific research comes from Critical Social Justice, as claimed by Krylov and Tanzman? Or that scientific censorship is most commonly motivated by prosocial concerns—such as social justice—as found by Clark et al.?

These authors highlight genuine concerns. Nevertheless, the authors' suggestions that race, gender and other identity-related topics are the primary areas for concern do not take sufficient account of what's taking place in other fields, due to deeper processes, to which I now turn.

Paradigms

These authors do not mention paradigms. This is an important omission, because commitment to a paradigm provides the basis for rejection of scholarly submissions, no matter how high their standard. An example is parapsychology, where findings clash with dominant views about causality, and where there is evidence of suppression of dissent (Hess 1992). Similarly, highly qualified scientists who challenge dominant paradigms concerning relativity, quantum theory and cosmology are likely to be marginalised (Corredoira and Perelman 2008).

Suppression of Dissent

These authors focus on censorship in the areas of race and gender, but there are many other areas. Indeed, there is a body of research on suppression of dissent in science, with numerous cases in particular areas, including nuclear power, pesticides, fluoridation, GMOs and vaccination (Delborne 2016; Martin 1999a, 1999b, 2015; Martin et al. 1986).

Despite their extensive reference list, Clark et al. do not cite any of this literature, aside from one recent study (Shir-Raz et al. 2023), whose findings they refer to as anecdotal. They do not explore the extensive evidence about numerous cases and the criteria offered for distinguishing suppression from merit-based rejection.

In a typical scenario, a scientist does research or speaks out in a way that threatens the interests of a powerful group: a corporation, government or profession. The scientist then is subject to censorship, loss of research grants, denial of access to research materials, reprimands, punitive transfers, public denunciations, demotion and/or dismissal. At the same time, scientists with similar levels of performance, but who do nothing threatening to the powerful group, suffer no adverse actions. This is the double-standard test: the standard applied to dissidents is different from that applied to conformists.

In addition, the timing is often revealing: the initiation of adverse actions occurs shortly after the scientist speaks out. Another indicator is a pattern of suppression in a particular field. For example, many doctors and dentists who opposed fluoridation suffered adverse

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consequences, so it is more plausible that actions taken against researchers critical of fluoridation can be attributed to suppression.

Undone Science

David Hess developed the idea of undone science. The idea is that some areas of research, called for by citizen groups, are either not pursued or not published by governments or corporations because the results might be unwelcome to them (Frickel et al. 2010; Hess 2016). There are many examples in the areas of health and the environment, such as the lack of Phase 3 clinical trials of recommended childhood vaccines against inert placebos (Anonymous 2022). Another example is the ban on US federal support for studies of gun violence.

Undone science operates as a sort of undercover censorship of scientific research. There is no overt evidence of silencing, rather an absence of investigation.

Incorporated Science

A vast amount of research is directed towards specific topics and outcomes, a process that can be called science being "incorporated" (Rose and Rose 1976a, 1976b). For example, military research is intended to serve military purposes, for example to develop more deadly weapons, more intrusive surveillance, more effective training of soldiers and more persuasive messaging. Although much military research is applied, it also shapes the directions of so-called basic research. For example, fundamental nuclear physics research has received far more attention because of military interest in nuclear weapons. Military shaping of research has been highly influential in computing, oceanography, communication, psychology and other fields. A shift from military priorities to nonviolent alternatives would have far-reaching implications for research topics, methods and disciplines (Martin 2001).

Corporations carry out and fund research in many fields, oriented to their interests. Pharmaceutical companies, for example, investigate substances that can bring large potential profits, but have little interest in diseases affecting poor people or substances they cannot patent.

Interactions

These different influences on science are often synergistic. The heavy funding of military-related fields and topics means that other topics, for example investigations into converting military facilities to civilian purposes, remain unstudied, an example of undone science. Pharmaceutical companies have little interest in investigating new uses of generic drugs, leading to undone science. When scientists expose corruption in pharmaceutical company research, they are liable to come under attack (Rost 2006). Suppression of dissent thus reinforces incorporated science. Meanwhile, the heavy emphasis on certain types of research can shape the central assumptions in entire fields, thus building these assumptions into dominant frameworks within research fields, which are sometimes called paradigms, as in the

case of a "pesticide paradigm" (van den Bosch 1978) or a "fluoridation paradigm" (Colquhoun 1987).

Censorship Revisited

The issues raised by Clark et al., Krylov and Tanzman, and Stevens et al. are significant, but need to be placed in the wider context of paradigms, suppression of dissent, undone science and incorporated science. These processes mostly operate close to the sources of scientific knowledge, including decisions about what can and should be studied, and hence are often less visible than overt censorship.

Looking at these processes also gives a different perspective on the purposes of research. These authors tend to see science as an unmitigated good. Clark et al. open their paper with the statement that "Science is among humanity's greatest achievements," one that is "a radical force in society: Challenging and disrupting sacred myths, cherished beliefs, and socially desirable narratives." Krylov and Tanzman write that "The politicization of science—the infusion of ideology into the scientific enterprise—threatens the ability of science to serve humanity."

A different perspective is that some types of research are a great danger to humanity. This has been a prominent theme in the critique of science since the development of nuclear weapons. There are too many uses of research for killing, exploitation, and maintaining injustice to simply support "science" without some link to human welfare. Nicholas Maxwell (2007) has called for a shift from what he calls the "philosophy of knowledge" to the "philosophy of wisdom," namely a shift from prioritising the acquisition of knowledge to solving problems such as war, poverty and environmental destruction.

Perhaps it is quite justified to limit research on developing more effective torture techniques or more deadly viruses. That is surely a prosocial motivation for censorship.

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