

Another ‘Sokal’ Hoax? The Latest Imitation Calls an Academic Journal’s Integrity Into Question

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The legacy of the legendary academic prankster [Alan Sokal](#) lives on.

The journal *Higher Education Quarterly* published a [study](#) last month purporting to show that donations from right-wing benefactors influence scholars to promote similarly conservative causes and candidates for jobs. The authors are listed as “Sage Owens” and “Kal Avers-Lynde III” — initials that spell out SOKAL III. It didn’t take long for online sleuths to out it as a hoax.

The *Higher Ed Quarterly* paper appears to be the latest imitation of Sokal’s infamous 1996 prank, in which he tricked the journal *Social Text* into publishing an article that he later revealed to be entirely a joke.

Sokal, a professor of physics at New York University, was lauded by conservative critics of higher education for his sendup of the progressive political views taking hold in academe. The original Sokal hoax also raised a host of questions about the integrity of the peer-review process that remain as relevant today as they were 25 years ago.

Among the glaring issues with the *Higher Education Quarterly* paper is that the authors are not affiliated with the University of California at Los Angeles, as they are listed.

“After reading through it, I had my doubts,” said Robert K. Toutkoushian, a professor of higher education at the University of Georgia and a member of the editorial board of *Higher Education Quarterly*. For one thing, Toutkoushian said, the paper cited a survey of faculty that got an 83-percent response rate, which seemed highly improbable. “Good luck getting 5 percent of faculty to respond,” he said.

Toutkoushian did not review the paper and said his role on the editorial board is largely honorific, but he has not seen any evidence that the journal’s process for reviewing papers is deeply flawed. Toutkoushian, who served as editor of the

journal *Research in Higher Education* from 2011 to 2020, said problem papers do slip through the cracks because it's impossible to verify all the data. In this case, however, the publisher also could have raised questions about the authenticity of the authors' identities.

The editors of the journal did not respond to a request for comment. Wiley, the journal's publisher, initially did not respond to a request for comment. Late Wednesday, a Wiley representative said, "*Higher Education Quarterly* takes research integrity incredibly seriously and is moving swiftly to retract the article, given that the data has been identified as fabricated and the authors have not disclosed their true identities."

But one of the purported authors of the paper did respond to an email from *The Chronicle*, writing that the journal "ought to be embarrassed" for accepting such obviously shoddy work. "No referee asked to see our data," wrote the alleged author, using the name [Sage Owens](#), from the email address sageowens@tutanota.com. The writer declined to provide any other identifying details.

"No referee examined whether the list of universities was real," the author said in their email. "No referee noticed the Forbes ratings cannot be correct. Every page has some glaring errors, but the central error is that the regression model is all wrong."

Two other journals rejected the paper immediately, the author of the email wrote, not because of the flaws in the study but because it was not focused internationally.

"Peer review does not protect against fraud," the person wrote. "It should protect against nonsense and bullshit. In this case and in others, it did not."

Questionable Authenticity

While *Higher Education Quarterly* failed to notice the article's problems, other scholars and a nonprofit entity quickly raised questions about the veracity of the study.

Jasmine Banks, executive director of [UnKoch My Campus](#), said her organization received an email from the person purporting to be Sage Owens asking the group to promote the study. UnKoch My Campus lists its mission as investigating the influence on higher education of the Charles Koch Foundation and other conservative donors.

Banks said her group has a protocol for identifying the authenticity of such work so that it doesn't promote the kind of disinformation that she and her team are trying to prevent on campuses. After UCLA confirmed that neither author was affiliated with

the university, the organization started an investigation to determine who was behind the effort, Banks said.

Banks fears, too, that the hoax is targeting her organization by seeking to spread misinformation and undermine the work of academic researchers.

Sokal has said the purpose of his piece, titled “*Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity*,” was meant to expose the sloppiness, absurd relativism, and intellectual arrogance of “certain precincts of the academic humanities.”

Like Sokal, the authors of this latest hoax also want to make a political point. “People will think this proves what they want it to prove,” the author wrote in the email to *The Chronicle*. “Conservatives outside the university system will claim it proves that peer review is corrupt because a top field journal accepted a paper they should have known was fake. Many left-wingers and liberals will claim it shows nothing. Some of the UnKoch people will claim this proves the Kochs are after them.”

Unlike Sokal, and some of his imitators, the current hoaxers have no immediate intentions to reveal their identity or identities. If they are to be believed, this is one of many such attempts they will make to deceive other scholars, journal editors and publishers.

“We plan to reveal the full extent of this hoax later,” the emailer wrote. “For now we recommend readers look for other fake papers.”