



Observations of an Owl (11)

Trapped

“Hey Owl! Why exactly did you quit active research way back along?” This is the most pressing question I have received from the readers of my column during the last couple of weeks.

Well, I could write a whole book about that but I’ll try to explain at least one of the more important reasons. In short, I was becoming increasingly dissatisfied

with the way the scientific business was developing.

My personal eye-opener was a seemingly unimportant and brief episode. It was on one of those special bittersweet days, when your melancholic mind constantly tries to drag you down to the murky depths of reason and meaning, that one of my owl PhD students suddenly landed beside me on the branch and asked whether he could now start writing a paper. I was perplexed! There could hardly have been a crueller way to snap me back to reality’s cold clench. This particular owl had just one result under his belt at the time. It had taken him months to obtain and he hadn’t even repeated it since. (You know, my gold standard was “N=3” where “N” is the number of times that the experiment had been done successfully). I merely afforded the student one of my grimmest looks (and let me tell you, owls can look reeally grim) so that the owl almost forgot to spread his wings upon his swift departure.

Despite this abrupt end, the episode had already catalysed my thoughts. “Damn publish-or-perish rule”, I grumbled to myself. “Once it was a researcher’s highest aim to analyse the obtained (and reproduced) data carefully and objectively and interpret them as reasonably and critically as possible. It seems that the one and only ambition of students today is to publish as many papers as possible within a short period.” My brain was unable to stop. “The libraries are becoming jammed up with more and more low-class publications while really excellent research is vanishing at an equally fast rate...” and on and on and on.

Until it finally dawned on me that I myself had already become part of this game. At that time, research money was increasingly being shifted to short-term research only. Therefore, my students needed to have papers so as not to spin off the career spiral. So what did I do? I started providing them with (and, consequently, only applied for) perfectly styled, low-risk mainstream projects – quick publications were guaranteed. And suddenly, I had to admit to myself that my research had thereby degenerated to an absolutely predictable and mediocre business. No more exciting results, surprising insights or pioneering innovations; only adding little bits of detail to a well-known process here or to a previously described phenomenon there.

Can you imagine how this sudden flash of realisation felt? For days I hid in the highest branches of my favourite tree. I neglected to preen my feathers and even at night I kept my eyes closed. I think you humans call this a depressive fit.

“My research had degenerated to an absolutely predictable and mediocre business.”

A couple of days later, I had somehow managed to pull my quills together, although my inner balance was still very precarious. Only for the callous world to hammer the next nail in my coffin...

I had to give a lecture about my research for the lay public. At that time, my research was about the regulation of the circadian rhythm in mice. So I told the audience about the metabolic changes from day to night and vice versa, about the patterns of day-night changes in the activities of certain proteins and about how cells probably receive the signal for these activity changes.

At the end I thought I had done a pretty good job, especially because there were some really well-thought questions from the audience. However, at the very end of the event a stork suddenly stood up. I can’t help but say that, even in my mind’s eye, he looked pretty arrogant. With his rattling voice he clattered, “How do you think your research might help solve the current problems of the suffering birdkind?”

Astonished, my lower beak dropped open. I was only able to reply, “I don’t know yet, it’s just basic research. However, I think it’s always good to know as much as possible about the physiology of one of our staple foods. Who knows today, what it will be good for in the future?”

Well, in retrospect I was (and still am) quite satisfied with this answer. At that moment, however, my brain immediately started doing somersaults again. “Oh no, the apply-or-die principle, again.” Of course, I had already known for a few years that my chances of getting funds were considerably higher if I could plausibly explain any future applications of my research. However, until this moment I had thought it was just a temporary policy trend to increasingly support research projects on the condition that the presumed results would yield an application or practical use within a short period of time. All because policy makers supposed this to be a good strategy for boosting “the economy”.

That moment in the lecture hall, however, made it clear to me once and for all that it’s not down to policy alone; it’s *everybody*. The taxpayer doesn’t care about basic science; the people prefer their money to go to applied science (or at least application-near science). And this attitude wasn’t about to change within the near future.

A month later, I closed my lab. This “publish-or-perish-and-apply-or-die trap” was one of the reasons for this (but only one).

A rather impulsive step, I admit; nevertheless, a fairly easy one. Owls don’t need to spend a lot of money on housing, we don’t need expensive vehicles for mobility and we don’t even have to buy our food. All we need is a cosy forest with some small, yummy inhabitants!

Have comments? Write to owl@lab-times.org

