

Discouraging honorific authorship

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Scientific collaboration, in general, and team work, in particular, are usually interpreted as characteristics of the era of ‘big science’ (cf. Price 1963). Above all, the challenges of increasing internationalization and globalization as well as the emergence of new interdisciplinary research fields resulted in an enormous intensification of collaboration. Reasons for collaboration such as ‘improving access to funds’, ‘obtaining prestige or visibility’, ‘collaboration for professional advancement’ (Beaver 2001) imply increasing co-authorship as well. If co-authorship, however, becomes uncoupled from regular scholarly communication processes, mechanisms of funding and professional advancement might indirectly foster *strategic co-authorship*. Symptoms of the already measurable inflationary tendencies (cf. Persson et al. 2004) are worrying forms of strategic co-authorship such as *honorific authorship* and *hyper-authorship* (Cronin 2001). Editors of scientific journals have recognized this phenomenon and began to act on these trends. In January 2010 Bruce Alberts wrote an editorial in *Science* (Alberts, 2010), where he as editor of *Science* refers to an agreement with the chief editors of *Nature* and *PNAS* to discourage “honorary authorships”. For *Science* the obligation is as follows.

All authors must agree to be so listed and must have seen and approved the manuscript, its content, and its submission to *Science*. *Science* will send an email to all authors to confirm receipt of each paper. Submission of a paper that has not been approved by all authors may result in immediate rejection without appeal.

Nature and *PNAS* have adopted similar instructions to the authors. The expected outcome is that the dramatic increase in the number of authors per article will slow down or end after 2010. When looking at the mean number of authors per article (Fig. 1), it appears that

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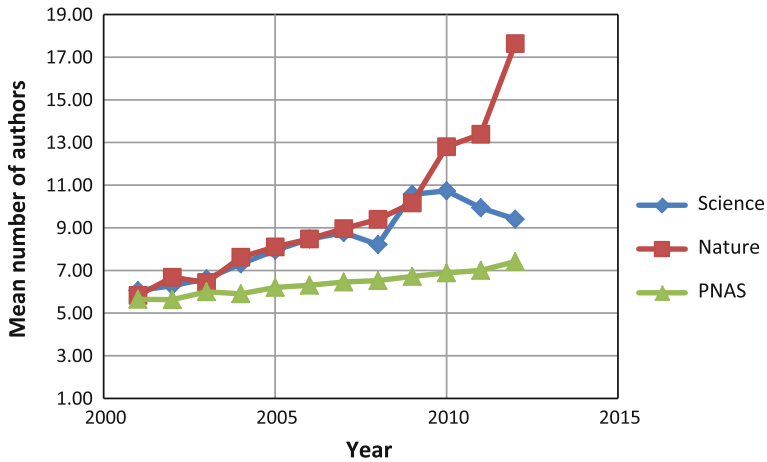


Fig. 1 Mean number of authors per article. Source: Thomson Reuters Web of Science

this policy have been successful for *Science* but not for *Nature* and *PNAS*. Could this be explained by the fact that *Science* demands each author to respond individually declaring their contribution, while for the other two journals this is done collectively in the manuscript?

If we calculate the median number of authors instead of means, articles with extremely large number of authors do not bias the statistic. Then all three journals give the impression to have complied with the new standard after 2010 (Fig. 2). But what the median value actually tells us, in relation to the mean value, is that *Nature* and *PNAS* have been less effective in reducing articles with long lists of authors.

The future will show if the administrative steps taken by the editor-in-chiefs of the above journals will be able yield sustainable results, and, if so, whether the example of *Science* will be followed by other scientific journals as well.

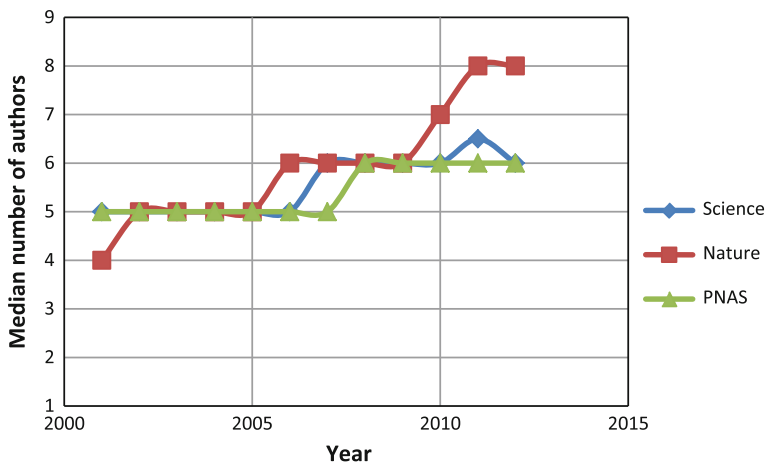


Fig. 2 Median number of authors per article. Source: Thomson Reuters Web of Science

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