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ABSTRACT

This short commentary argues that academic letters to editors on politically-contested topics must be treated with particular ethical care. The interface between science and Māori/Indigenous knowledge is one such topic, vulnerable to inadequate but commonly-held ideas about both science and Māori/Indigenous knowledge. Letters to editors by scientists are personal opinion but carry the imprimatur of science expertise. When such letters contain lay views masquerading as expert opinion, they have negative effects on both science and Māori knowledge, hence qualifying to be described as ‘word weapons’.

KEYWORDS

Academic freedom; editorial practice; letters to editors; mātauranga Māori/Māori knowledge; publishing ethics

The ‘letter to the editor’ is a written genre that occupies an ambiguous position in today’s world of academic publishing and ethics. Here I argue that academic letters to editors can be mis-used as ‘word weapons’ to advance politically extreme and scholarly shoddy views. Beyond academia, such letters written by academics to editors of general periodicals can have marked social effects, especially when the topic is politically sensitive. This commentary arises from recent events involving three letters to editors about the relationship between science and Indigenous (Māori) knowledge. Thinking about the academic publishing ecosystem (Peters et al., 2016), and with an interest in editorial education and ethics (Jackson & Stewart, 2017; Stewart, 2016), I conclude that academic editors and journals need to take particular ethical care in dealing with letters on such contested topics.

The most recent of these three letters was published in mid-2021 in a popular local magazine, the *New Zealand Listener* (Clements et al., 2021). Signed by seven senior professors at the highest-ranked science university in Aotearoa New Zealand, this letter warned of the threat posed to science by Māori knowledge. It whipped up a media frenzy and public storm of debate. In response, within about 48 hours over 2,000 academics and others signed an open letter declaring that Mātauranga Māori definitely *is* science (Sowman-Lund, 2021). It would be hard to invent a clearer demonstration of the quixotic current state of public debate in Aotearoa New Zealand concerning science and

Māori knowledge. Unintentionally or not, the *Listener* letter has harmful effects for both science and Māori knowledge (Stewart, 2021).

The story of the second letter begins several years earlier, when I was invited to participate in a Special Issue (SI) of the local science journal *New Zealand Science Review*, NZSR, on the theme of 'Mātauranga and Science in Practice.' The two SI guest editors are leading Māori researchers; I've known the one who contacted me for a number of years through professional networks, so I didn't hesitate in responding with two proposed articles, one sole-authored, the other with a scientist co-author, both of which were eventually published (Stewart, 2019; Stewart & Buchanan, 2020). Sufficient interest was generated for the SI to fill two issues of the journal, the first appearing in late 2019, and the second early in 2020 (Mercier & Jackson, 2019).

A journal hosts the work it publishes: the journal editors and authors are therefore entangled in a relationship that bears some similarity to that between a host and their guest. In pursuing this SI project, NZSR put itself in the position of a host to my work and that of the other Māori authors. The authors in the SI (including me) are not part of the usual author networks of this journal, nor from its traditional readership or researcher association. Effectively, we were guest authors of the host journal editors. The journal left the guest editors to work with the authors in completing the work involved in bringing to the journal, and its readership, a body of work quite different from its usual offerings. I do not read this journal and would not normally publish in it because I work in the discipline of education, not science. So I remained blissfully ignorant until a year or so went by as to how NZSR and its editors repaid our *koha* (contribution, gift) to their journal.

In the following issue NZSR published a letter to the editor written in response to the SI by an emeritus professor of physics, Jeff Tallon (2020), who was "dismayed to read some of the articles" and gave a brief version of science dogma. Tallon warned that "editors of scientific journals have lost their jobs" for publishing work in contravention of this dogma, seemingly taking issue with the journal editors for pursuing this ambitious, successful project. The letter makes no mention of the active national debates on this theme, the *Vision Mātauranga* policy covering all publicly-funded research, nor the interest shown by international science journals in efforts to integrate Māori knowledge with science (e.g. Powell, 2018).

A letter to the editor published in an academic journal is non-peer reviewed, but still has the imprimatur of academic respectability. Tallon's letter is personal opinion about my and the other authors' work, but borrows his leading position in the scientific community to add weight to his censure of the SI and those whose work it represents. The NZSR editors enticed me to share my work in their journal, then saw fit to publish Tallon's polemical response, with no effort to seek my approval, nor offer me right of reply. They showed no apparent concern for the effect of this letter on me, as an author who had entrusted my work to them. The journal thus displayed a lack of hospitality, in the terms outlined above, towards the authors and guest editors of the SI.

A year or so later, in May 2021, Tallon himself alerted me to his letter and his intent to re-publish it in a second local journal. This was how I found out that a second journal had recently re-published one of my papers from the SI, without my knowledge. That episode revealed possible differences in publishing ethics (*tikanga*) between disciplines, whereby the science journals shared the articles amongst themselves without reference to the Māori authors and guest editors, clearly believing themselves entitled to do that. In contrast, my peers in philosophy of education viewed re-publishing my article without my knowledge as a breach of editorial ethics. My experience forms a cautionary tale for other authors about the possible dangers of submitting to science journals on the interface between science and Māori knowledge: such work is both of intense interest in those journals *and* liable to provoke negative responses like Tallon's.

Tallon interpreted my paper as 'anti-science' which is anathema to me. I asked him to point to any section in my paper that demonstrated anti-science views, and (ignoring the paper as a whole) he quoted the below sentences, where I recount devising a curriculum model for planning and

teaching science in te reo Māori in 1993, before the Pūtaiao curriculum existed, working alone as the inaugural Pūtaiao teacher at Te Wharekura o Hoani Waititi Marae in Oratia, Auckland:

Since Māori knowledge includes ‘the gods’ or knowledge of spiritual realms, while science does not, I drew a diagram in which mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) is a large circle, and science is a smaller circle inside it. This differs from the more typical ‘Venn diagram’ model with two intersecting circles used to show the overlap between science and Māori knowledge (Roberts 1998; Simon 2003). The benefit of my ‘superset’ model of the relationship between science and mātauranga Māori is that it makes all of science, not only in some domains such as ecology, relevant to Māori and Māori school students. (Stewart, 2019, p. 66)

Tallon objected to a single idea in the introduction to my paper i.e. ‘science as a sub-set of Mātauranga’ and in so doing ignored the overall value of my paper, which distills decades of thought into a list of 7 concise arguments for and against the proposition that Mātauranga Māori is/is not science. Tallon used this one idea to judge me as being ‘anti-science’ - but in so doing assumed the mantle of expert to pass judgement on my ideas about Mātauranga Māori and its relationship with science. His difficulty with accepting my logic seems related to an implicit value judgement, typical of Pākehā attitudes to Māori knowledge, that saw the ‘sub-set’ idea as derogatory to science and therefore offensive. His certainty of judgement contrasts with the ongoing nature of the wider debates about the relationship between science and Māori knowledge, represented by the storm over the *Listener* letter, to which our SI sought to contribute. Perhaps my article did not make sufficiently clear that my ‘superset’ model was not *what* I taught, but how I was *justifying* teaching all of science in a Māori school. Tallon seemed to miss the significance of my superset model in reference to the common ‘Venn diagram’ model. To label fields like ecology as the ‘overlap’ between science and Mātauranga Māori excludes te ao Māori from most areas of science. If science is knowledge of the natural world and Mātauranga Māori is knowledge of everything, then it is logical to conceptualise science as a sub-set of Mātauranga Māori. This concept *is* a Māori-centred ‘appropriation’ of science: its purpose is to make *all* of science appropriate for a Māori student to learn.

I take exception to being labelled as ‘anti-science’ and am left with mixed feelings about participating in the NZSR Special Issue. Publishing Tallon’s letter is likely to discourage Māori authors from submitting work to the journal in future. Unintentionally or not, by these decisions the journal reinforces the chains binding science to Whiteness.

The third letter in my sample is a precursor to the *Listener* letter discussed above, which three of the seven professors had published a year or so earlier in an online academic newsletter (Corballis et al., 2019). All three letters feature similar uninformed statements by scientists about a topic (Māori knowledge) on which they have no professional knowledge (May, 2021).

Letters are a very old form of academic text, which affords them gravitas - letters are like the original form of social media. Letters to editors of academic journals are usually employed to settle points of detail, published in response to previously-published research articles. Academic editors may be unprepared to receive letters such as Tallon (2020) and may operate on the assumption they are obliged to publish them, or lack guidelines for dealing with them. In my story, above, neither of the two local scientific journals seemed to realise that publishing Tallon’s letter was unacceptable to me, nor to understand why.

Letters to academic editors should be considered as a particular form of submission, requiring greater than normal ethical care and review. Academic journals can, and perhaps should, write policies to restrict the category of ‘letters to the editor’ to minor points of clarification or correction of previous articles. They could also retain editorial discretion over the publication of letters to the editor, and reserve the right to make editorial decisions about letters, including peer review and/or author right of reply. In the absence of editorial care and oversight, letters to editors can be used as word weapons, hence representing an abuse of scholarly freedom and freedom of speech. My point is to bring letters to editors to awareness in discussions of editorial practice and ethics, and highlight

the need for academic editors to have robust guidelines for dealing with letters. Kia ora mai tātou katoa.

Notes on contributor

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