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Ivan Oransky: the 2004-2006 digital undertaker for Elsevier's The Lancet

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Ivan Oransky is a self-proclaimed science watchdog who, together with Adam Marcus, have taken on the world of science in a blaze of public shaming – disguised as science journalism – that has already caused irreparable damage to science, despite the informative nature of those reports. Their portal for launching attacks on the publishing establishment and on scientists is Retraction Watch, a blog that sees monthly traffic in the hundreds of thousands of hits. One of the loudly claimed key tenants of Retraction Watch is to hold science and scientists accountable, and to thus be open and transparent. What is not very known, because Oransky fails to provide a full listing of his own publications, i.e., he does not show equivalent transparency that he expects or demands from others, is that he held a very important role at Elsevier's The Lancet, a premier medical journal that he now aggressively critiques, almost without impunity. That role at The Lancet was primarily to record the death of medical scientists. In the real world, taking care of the dead and the deceased lies in the hands of an undertaker. It is thus very apt that the role of digital undertaker for The Lancet established the necessary credentials that Oransky required to overlook the cadaver he and Marcus wish to create of science, and of scientists' and publishers' reputations.

Key words: Critical analysis; Lack of transparency; Opacity

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THE RISE OF DR. IVAN ORANSKY AS THE LANCET'S DIGITAL UNDERTAKER

In 2010, some hope was created that important issues in science could be discussed in a fair and frank online discussion forum. That hope came in the form of Ivan Oransky and Adam Marcus, two self-proclaimed science watchdogs¹, who created a blog, Retraction Watch (www.retractionwatch.com) that had, as its stated core objective, to examine retractions so as to better understand processes in science that might be leading to its degradation. Humble beginnings now appear to have blossomed into one of the most powerful (in terms of web traffic) anti-science blogs (with a pseudo pro-science façade) in the recent modern era of the internet. Receiving strong financial support of their charitable parent organization, the Center for Scientific Integrity Inc. (CSI)², Oransky and Marcus have embarked on a crusade that is rapidly leading to the implosion of science by invoking the lack of accountability and transparency by science bodies, editors, publishers and scientists. This does not imply that these parties are also not responsible for this crisis, but simply that Retraction Watch is serving as an

extremely dangerous and explosive catalyst. Sadly, and very ironically, on the "About Adam Marcus" (<http://retractionwatch.com/meet-the-retraction-watch-staff/about-adam-marcus/>) and "About Ivan Oransky" (<http://retractionwatch.com/meet-the-retraction-watch-staff/about/>) web-pages at Retraction Watch, no information appears about the publishing background of these co-founders. This is quite remarkable, considering that both individuals are focusing on the publishing history of scientists, and their lack of accountability, to expand and fortify their anti-science blog. It is therefore fitting to begin to examine what these two anti-science watchdogs, who appear to have all but dropped out of medical science careers to become science journalists, have published.

The list in Appendix 1 shows how Oransky was given an incredibly important task at Elsevier's premier medical journal, The Lancet (<http://www.journals.elsevier.com/the-lancet/>). This task, primarily as obituary writer, involved registering the deaths of medical scientists, which, in the real world, is the responsibility assigned to an undertaker. As can be appreciated from the list of 57 papers published by Oransky in The Lancet, 40 were obituaries published

from 2004-2006 (Fig. 1; Appendix 1). In this period, Oransky became a scribe of death. It is highly likely that this close association with the deceased among the medical community – even within his own family – would have created a personality that embraced the death of things related to science, if not science itself. Given this vast and scholarly training in issues related to death, it is thus fitting that he be the co-founder of Retraction Watch and President of the CSI, the self-proclaimed organization dealing with the death of science and science publishing. Very unfortunately, most scientists – too afraid of being trolled or harassed by Retraction Watch and thus being profiled on the Oransky and Marcus blog for issues sometimes unrelated to retractions – will likely not make this association. Thus, may this letter shed some fresh perspectives on the possible reasons and psychology behind the anti-science blog, Retraction Watch.

INCREASING CONCERNS ABOUT ORANSKY, THE RETRACTION WATCH TEAM, AND THEIR OBJECTIVES

In the first of several papers aiming to explore the inconsistencies, contradictions, lack of professionalism or bias by Retraction Watch and its staff and co-founders, it was shown that Retraction Watch employs very lax editorial policies, enacting changes, even to the title of a blog story, without any formal corrective measures or retractions, followed by republication, as would occur in an academic journal of quality.³ That first paper was important because it highlighted an important double standard in place at Retraction Watch:

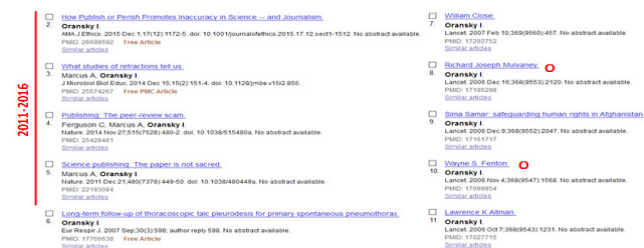


Fig. 1 Screenshot of the NIH's PubMed showing a partial idea of the flood of obituaries written by Ivan Oransky from 2004-2006, all published in The Lancet, a medical journal with a very high impact factor. From 1996-2016, Oransky published a total of 75 PubMed-listed "papers", 40 (i.e., 53%) of which were obituaries. Red "O" indicates an obituary.

extremely aggressive scrutiny of scientists, editors, journals and publishers, but a lack of reciprocal scrutiny of their own editing and publishing or journalistic practices.

One of the unintended consequences of this long list of 40 obituaries (Appendix 1) published in a high-ranking medical journal, and indexed on PubMed, is that such simple reports with no profound scientific value at all – with all due respect to the deceased – have given Oransky a stunning head-start among medical scientists who struggle to publish their hard work in a competitive journal like The Lancet. If one considers the current The Lancet impact factor scores for 2004-2006 (Table 1), Oransky's PubMed-listed "publications" (Appendix 1; Fig 1) would offer an incredibly biased and skewed impact factor score and citation metrics to Oransky in essence for simply describing the passing away of deceased medical scientists. It is curious that only three of the 40 obituaries written by Oransky are in fact labelled as "obituary", perhaps to avoid the embarrassment of being associated with science's premier digital morgue. This unfair attribution of such high impact factor scores for in essence obituary-type work would almost certainly cause rage amongst many medical scientists, no doubt. Although there is no proof yet that Oransky has benefitted financially, or otherwise, from the impact factor scores

Table 1: The JCR impact factors of The Lancet (2004-2006)

2006 Journal impact	25.800
2005 Journal impact	23.878
2004 Journal impact	21.713



Fig. 2 On August 3, 2015, Ivan Oransky gloatingly self-applauded Retraction Watch's first (# 3 in Fig. 1) academic publishing achievement: "We published our first scholarly paper, a review of the retraction literature, in the Journal of Microbiology & Biology Education".⁴ Not a very substantial achievement if one considers that Retraction Watch has been in existence since 2010, and given the highly prolific obituary writing by Oransky for The Lancet in 2004-2006.

of his *The Lancet* publications, certainly having this many “papers” (more correctly entries) in a leading medical journal has given him a potentially unfair advantage over other medical journalists, and even medical researchers, many of whom would dream of having just a single paper in *The Lancet* during their entire medical career. However, having this heavy presence on PubMed and pseudo-academic productivity in *The Lancet* allows for influence peddling, which was undoubtedly essential for the initial growth and professional survival of Oransky and his Retraction Watch. This possibility is not beyond reality since Oransky and Marcus have a poor academic journal publishing track record, having scored their first academic paper for Retraction Watch – since inception in 2010 – only in 2014⁴ (Fig. 2).

The irony of having served as *The Lancet*’s digital undertaker, is that Oransky now keeps a critical and watchful eye over its attempted demise (<http://retractionwatch.com/category/by-journal/lancet/>), always under the guise of “critical” scientific journalism. In fact, Oransky personally wrote several of the stories himself⁵⁻¹⁰ before he primarily contracted Cat Ferguson and Alison McCook to complete these tasks for him.

DISCLAIMER AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author is not associated with any academic institute, blog or web-site. The author was profiled multiple times, unfairly and considerably aggressively, by Retraction Watch, always under the supervision and approval of Oransky, and often for issues totally unrelated to retractions.

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EDITORS’S COMMENTS :VIEWS EXPRESSED HERE ARE TOTALLY OF JAIME A. TEIXEIRA DA SILVA.

Editorial board of *Acta Medica International* does not cut/ edit/ configure “Letter to editor”.

ABOUT AUTHORS

Dr. Teixeira da Silva obtained his BSc in botany and genetics at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, an MSc in Horticulture at Kagawa University in Japan and a PhD in Agricultural Biotechnology from the United Graduate School of Agricultural Sciences, Ehime University, Japan. A wide range of experience with botany, genetics, molecular biology, plant physiology, agronomy and ecology, among other topics in plant science. An interest in publishing and ethics-related topics as pertains to the plant sciences. Founder and former EIC of Global Science Books.

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APPENDIX 1 LIST OF OBITUARIES PUBLISHED BY DR. IVAN ORANSKY IN THE LANCET (2004-2006)

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- Oransky I. Wayne S. Fenton. Lancet. 2006 Nov 4;368(9547):1568. PMID:17099954
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- Oransky I. Clarence Dennis. Lancet. 2005 Sep 3-9;366(9488):802. PMID:16196128
- Oransky I. Vincent J. Fontana. Lancet. 2005 Aug 27-Sep 2;366(9487):710. PMID:16193615
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- Oransky I. David Tyrrell. Lancet. 2005 Jun 18-24;365(9477):2084. PMID:16121448
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- Oransky I. Jeanne Petrek. Lancet. 2005 May 28-Jun 3;365(9474):1844. PMID:16118904
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- Oransky I. William Silverman. Lancet. 2005 Jan 8-14;365(9454):116. PMID:15643704
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