

Time-line of events surrounding investigations of alleged misconduct in *Cell* (2010) 142: 320-32.

(1) In July 2012, I established the website www.science-fraud.org, to anonymously report on issues of data integrity in published papers in the life sciences. Over the course of its 6 month existence, the site documented allegations of image manipulation in 275 papers, of which nearly ¼ have already been retracted or corrected. Due to the potentially damaging nature of the materials published, which could affect my own full-time career in academic research, I published the site under a pseudonym “Frances deTriusce” (an anagram of Science Fraudster). Cases were sent to me by anonymous tipsters, to an anonymous gmail address: scifraudster@gmail.com.

(2) In January 2013, someone uncovered my identity and posted an email to >100 scientists as well as several senior administrators at my University, urging them to sue me for defamation. A lot has been written about these events (<http://news.sciencemag.org/2013/01/fraudster-blog-author-outed-and-comes-clean>, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/billfrezza/2013/01/09/a-barrage-of-legal-threats-shuts-down-whistleblower-site-science-fraud/>), and while everyone has an opinion regarding the role of anonymity in the whistle-blowing process, **the facts of this case should not be clouded by the manner in which they initially came to light.**

For most of 2013, I engaged the services of a lawyer at great personal cost to defend myself against several legal threats. One of those threats came from the author of the *Cell* paper. While this is peripheral to any interest of COPE in this case, it should be mentioned for two reasons: (i) In the interests of full disclosure it is simply the right thing to do. The person who wrote the paper I’m questioning threatened to sue me, and I’ll leave you to draw your own conclusions about how that may have affected my judgment in this matter. (ii) NY state has a 1 year statute-of-limitations on issues of defamation, which explains why I waited until January 2014 before actively pursuing this case further.

(3) In September 2012, I published a post drawing into question 3 papers by a junior faculty member at Tufts University, Gizem Donmez PhD. The case was particularly interesting to me because the papers were on the topic of Sirtuins, a family of proteins that I work on in my own research. The original copy of the web-page from my site is attached to this email (750 Don’ Mez’ with the sirtuins _ Science Fraud.htm, and accompanying folder). Also attached is the powerpoint file used to prepare the images

in the web-page (Donmez Original files posted to SF.ppt) The papers are in 3 different journals, and the *Cell* images are on pages 5-8 of the powerpoint file.

(4) In addition to posting the allegations on-line, I directly emailed the editors of the 3 journals where the questioned papers were published – *Cell*, *J. Biol. Chem.*, and *J. Neurosci.* – as well as the Ellison Medical Foundation, which funds Dr. Donmez's work. Below is the original e-mail from my anonymous gmail account to the journal editors and funding agency...

From: Frances de Triusce <scifraudster@gmail.com>
Date: Wed, Sep 26, 2012 at 4:47 PM
Subject: Fraud allegations against Gizem Donmez PhD in 3 published papers
To: rsprott@ellisonfoundation.org, klee@ellisonfoundation.org, kathleen.dunlap@tufts.edu, mfedor@scripps.edu, maunsell@hms.harvard.edu, emarcus@cell.com

Ellison Foundation Directors (Drs. Sprott, Lee),
Tufts Neuroscience Program Director (Dr. Dunlap),
Editors in Chief (Drs. Fedor, Maunsell, Marcus)

I run the popular website www.science-fraud.org, which receives around 3000 hits a day, and is devoted to unearthing instances of scientific misconduct in the published literature. Recently, we came into possession of information regarding misconduct by Gizem Donmez, a rising star in the aging field who was recently named an Ellison Foundation New Scholar in Aging. The allegations comprise irrefutable evidence of data manipulation in some of Dr. Donmez's papers, both from her time as a post-doc' in Dr. Leonard Guarente's laboratory at MIT, and more recently from her own independent laboratory at Tufts University. The papers are...

J Neurosci. 2012;32:124-32; PMID22219275
Cell 2010;142:320-332; PMID20655472
J Biol Chem 2012;287:32307-32311; PMID22898818

I will be making this information public (<http://www.science-fraud.org/?p=750>) at 7am EST tomorrow (Thursday September 27th). After you have viewed the evidence, I request the following...

Journal editors - Please verify that the papers do in-fact contain data manipulation, and retract them. I do not believe corrections will be appropriate in the case of *JBC* and *J Neurosci*, since the data manipulation is of gargantuan proportions in both papers, and cannot be written off as a simple mistake.

Ellison Foundation directors - Please determine whether any of the questionable data were used in the grant application of Dr. Donmez. If so, retract the award, being mindful that fraudulent data presentation for the purpose of acquiring funds is a prosecutable offense in some jurisdictions.

Tufts administration - Please launch an internal investigation to determine the perpetrator of the misconduct in Dr. Donmez's laboratory (although the historical record would suggest it is Dr. Donmez herself). If you desire, you may inform the US Office of Research Integrity, although Dr. Donmez does not have NIH funding so this case would fall outside their jurisdiction, since they only pursue federally-funded researchers.

Finally, I would advise VERY strongly against ignoring these requests or attempting to cover up this misconduct case. You may feel uncomfortable engaging in conversation with an anonymous science blogger, but the stakes are high enough that retaliation would be harsh if my identity was compromised. I therefore invite you to take a look for yourselves, come to your own conclusions, and in return I merely request the courtesy of a response to indicate that you are in receipt of this message. If I do not receive any response, this will serve to indicate an intention to suppress this information, which is not advisable in the current social media environment.

Yours with integrity,
Frances deTriusce

(5) *J. Neurosci.*, *J. Biol. Chem.*, and the Ellison Foundation all responded within 24 hrs., indicating they would look into the matter. *Cell* did not respond at all. I followed up with another email (anonymous) on

November 7th 2012, and again *Cell* did not respond. It should be noted at this time that the senior author of the *Cell* paper in question (Leonard Guarente of MIT) sits on the editorial board of *Cell*.

(6) In May 2013 *J. Neurosci.* responded. At this time I informed them of my anonymity being compromised in January 2013, and we continued conversations using my real identity (paul_brookes@urmc.rochester.edu). Despite being presented with new evidence of image problems (attached file - Donmez J Neurosci.ppt), the journal asserts that an institutional investigation found no fault, and refuses to re-open the matter. Since fall 2013 the journal editor-in-chief (John Maunsell of Harvard) has taken to ignoring my emails completely. These events are documented on my laboratory website (<http://www.psblab.org/?p=167>), in a long blog post about the problems associated with journals dealing with misconduct allegations, published January 2014. I sent Dr. Maunsell a link to the post, but he did not respond.

(7) In May 2013, *J. Biol. Chem.* published a correction notice for the problematic Donmez paper. However, it too contained further problems, and after a long and protracted process (involving, it must be said, some very open and exemplary behavior by Patricia Valdez, JBC's ethics officer), they finally agreed to retract the paper in July 2013. The retraction notice was completely opaque, simply reading "this article has been withdrawn by the authors". I believe this type of notice is contrary to COPE guidelines on retractions, which encourage provision of a reason for the retraction.

Again, the blog post at my lab' website (<http://www.psblab.org/?p=167>) details the process, and includes new evidence presented to the journal during follow up email conversations (the original powerpoint file used to prepare these images is attached - JBC Donmez Correction Problems.ppt).

(8) During this time (July 2013), the lead author on the 3 papers threatened to sue me for defamation (see attached letter... Letter to Atty. Edwards.pdf). She also threatened further action if the JBC retraction were to become publicly known through websites such as PubPeer or Retraction Watch. It is therefore my firm belief that the underlying reason for the opaque retraction at JBC was a back-room deal between the journal and Dr. Donmez's lawyer, in which the ability to quietly withdraw the paper was agreed to in return for no publicity.

(8) BUT – this is not about *J. Biol. Chem.* or *J. Neurosci.* The complaint is about *Cell*, although I do think the events at the other journals provide an interesting context, in particular due to the reliance of both journals on the outcome of investigations by the author's institutions. Anyway, onto the *Cell* case...

As stated earlier, *Cell* did not respond to my original anonymous emails. Since I have a busy academic career, and was dealing with a lot of other problem papers, I did not get around to sending a follow-up email (using my real name) until October 28th 2013:

Dr. Marcus,

I am writing to inquire if you are aware of, and plan to take any action on, allegations of data manipulation in a paper in *Cell*? The paper in question is *Cell* (2010) v142, p320-332. Allegations regarding the data in this paper originally surfaced over a year ago, on the website science-fraud.org, which I used to run (before it was shut down by legal threats). The paper was questioned alongside 2 others from the 1st author (Donmez), one of which has subsequently been retracted (in *JBC*), and the other (*J. Neurosci*) is still being discussed with the journal - in that case the journal has admitted the data were mishandled but it was at a time before they had a formal policy in place so they refuse to retroactively apply the policy to demand a correction. It should also be noted that Dr. Donmez has tried to sue me for defamation regarding what I have alleged in these matters. FYI there are also 2 more papers from her time as a PhD student in Germany which contain similar evidence, and have yet to be made public.

Anyway, in case you haven't seen them, attached are the images in question. The evidence is pretty clear in the case of 7C, S2E, and S4B. The status of Figure 4B/5C comparison is less solid, but still remarkably similar. I would appreciate if you could do the following things:

1) Acknowledge receipt of this email. Sorry to spell this out, but the number of editors who simply ignore this type of email is quite shocking. A simple response to indicate that you have received and understand the content of this message, and what you plan to do about it, is courteously requested (not to mention being the first item on the flowchart from C.O.P.E. about how to deal with such allegations).

2) Given the ongoing legal issues at play here (Dr. Donmez is still trying to sue me), I would greatly appreciate if the file I sent you does not get passed on to her. In addition I note that **the lead author of the paper is a member of your editorial board**. Thus, discretion would be advised in investigating these allegations. I am sure that you have a panel of experts who would be able to assess the data and request the original files if necessary.

Finally, I should make you aware that in both the *J. Neurosci* and *J. Biol. Chem* cases mentioned above, both journals took at face value investigations performed by the institutions. In at least one case (*JBC*) those investigations turned out to be flawed, and further negotiation with the journal resulted in a retraction. Thus, I would advise strongly against simply asking the institution to investigate, because it appears they have not done so properly in the other cases. Institutions tend to be rather conflicted in such matters, due to complications such as indirect costs on their faculty members' grants.

I await your response regarding how you intend to deal with these very suspicious looking data. FYI, the US Office of Research Integrity knows about this case.

Thank-you
PSB

Note the highlighted text (this is important later). Dr. Marcus responded a week later on November 7th as follows:

Dear Dr. Brookes,
I have received your email and we are looking into the concerns you raise.
Best wishes,
Emilie

Emilie Marcus, PhD
Editor, *Cell*

Nothing more was heard until January 8th 2014 (9 weeks), when I received the following email:

Dear Dr. Brookes,

Thank you for your e-mails. In addition to having been informed of the results of the institutional investigation, we have also examined the implicated figure panels editorially. Despite some apparent superficial similarities, upon extensive examination we were unable to find any compelling evidence for manipulation or duplication in those panels and therefore are not taking any further action at this time.

Best wishes,

Sri Devi Narasimhan, Ph.D.,

Scientific Editor, Cell

On behalf of the Cell editorial team.

Notably, the email did not come from the person I originally addressed (EiC Dr. Emilie Marcus). I therefore investigated its sender, and found a rather interesting coincidence... Dr. Narasimhan (<http://www.linkedin.com/pub/sri-devi-narasimhan/2/63b/6b1>) recently trained as a post-doctoral fellow in the lab' of Dr. Heidi Tissenbaum at UMass Worcester (<http://profiles.umassmed.edu/profiles/ProfileDetails.aspx?From=SE&Person=658>). Dr. Tissenbaum is a former trainee of Dr. Leonard Guarente, the paper's lead author (<http://web.mit.edu/biology/guarente/people/>). I responded to Dr. Narasimhan's email the same day, as follows:

From: Paul Brookes [mailto:paul_brookes@urmc.rochester.edu]

Sent: 08 January 2014 23:01

To: Narasimhan, Sri Devi (ELS-CMA); Marcus, Emilie (ELS-CMA); cope_opsmanager@publicationethics.org

Subject: Re: Cell (2010) v142, p320-332

Thank-you for your response Dr. Narasimhan. I have a few questions:

- 1) What tools did you apply to determine that the alleged similar panels were in-fact not similar? Can I see your analysis?
- 2) Did you request originals from the authors?
- 3) In the case of Figure 4B, the problem was not duplication at all, but undisclosed splicing. Your response fails to address this issue. I assume you will be issuing a corrigendum to disclose this, since the practice is contrary to your journal's policies?

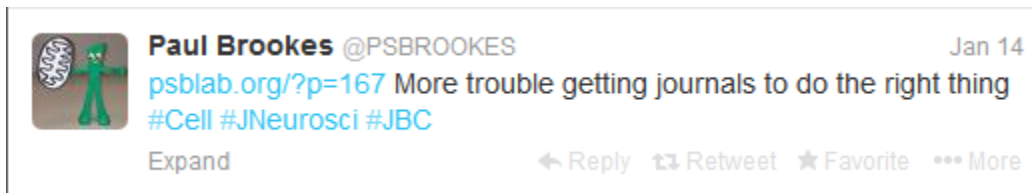
Also, correct me if I'm wrong, but don't you have something of a conflict of interest here? You did a post-doc' with Heidi Tissenbaum, who came straight out of the lab' of the lead author on this paper, Leonard Guarente! When I originally contacted the journal about these problems, I specifically warned about conflict-of-interest, because Dr. Guarente is on the editorial board of Cell. Now, it seems the EiC simply bought in one of his scientific descendents to do the investigation. I'm pretty sure that flies in the face of C.O.P.E. guidelines, but just to be sure I've CC'ed COPE on this matter and included the original files. Maybe they'd like to weigh in on this?

I eagerly await your response to the above questions, perhaps this time determined by an INDEPENDENT 3rd party investigator who is not massively conflicted! I know of several people who can do this type of analysis in an unbiased manner (e.g. Alan Price the former director of the ORI, who is now a private investigator in the field of scientific misconduct), if you need an introduction.

Paul Brookes

I have yet to receive any response to my email. I CC'ed COPE operations manager, and Ms. Ridgeway was kind enough to respond, outlining the links for your official complaints procedure ...and here we are today.

(9) Dr. Marcus was informed of the blog post at my website, in which a re-analysis of the Cell images was presented. I also emailed her the original powerpoint file used to prepare the images for the post (attached file - Donmez Cell 2nd eval.ppt). I included #Cell in my tweets about the incident...



So far the response from Cell has been complete silence. I have emailed Dr. Marcus informing her of my intent to file a formal complaint with COPE. I have tried to contact her by telephone, have left voice-mails, and left messages with her assistant. None of these communications have been responded to. Similarly, Dr. Narasimhan has not responded to my follow up emails.

(10) So, to the crux of my complaint. I believe that the editorial team at *Cell*, has breached the guidelines and code-of-conduct of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), as follows:

In refusing to initially respond to an anonymous correspondent, and then further refusing to respond to emails and follow up requests for more information using my real identity, the journal breached code section 15.1 *"Editors should respond promptly to complaints and should ensure there is a way for dissatisfied complainants to take complaints further"*.

In assigning a misconduct investigation to a staff member who is a trainee of a trainee of the lead author of the paper in question, the journal breached code sections 2.1 *"Duties include informing readers about steps taken to ensure that submissions from members of the journal's staff or editorial board receive an objective and unbiased evaluation"*, and 17.1 *"Editors should have systems for managing their own conflicts of interest as well as those of their staff, authors, reviewers and editorial board members"*.

(11) It is not immediately clear to me what power COPE has to solve this issue at *Cell*. At the very least, I would like to request that the files be examined by an independent 3rd party such as the one I suggested in my email to Dr. Marcus. Perhaps COPE would be willing to push for this, as a way to resolve the matter? Regardless how you choose to proceed, please keep me informed of any actions to be taken.

In deliberating these events, you should also be aware that the US Office of Research Integrity is in possession of all the latest information, and is actively investigating this case. In the quite likely event that they reach a decision on this matter, it would not reflect well on either *Cell* or COPE, for both organizations to be seen as doing nothing.

I can be contacted as follows, if you require any further information on these matters:

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