

B.C. economist in grim battle against deceptive scholarship

Derek Pyne, a Thompson Rivers University economist, is among the global academics determined to expose deceptive academic journals, sometimes at a risk to their careers.

DOUGLAS TODD

Updated: August 12, 2018

https://vancouversun.com/opinion/columnists/b-c-economist-locked-in-grim-battle-against-deceptive-scholarship?video_autoplay=true

We've all heard about fake news. Now we have deceptive scholarship.

A determined B.C. economics professor has journeyed into the heart of a dark world where academics seeking to advance their careers have had hundreds of thousands of their articles published for a fee in journals that either deserve suspicion or are outright phony.

In academia, where the admonition to “publish or perish” is not an empty threat, it is often difficult for scholars to have their research published in legitimate journals, let alone top ones. But it's becoming increasingly common for academics to get articles produced in questionable journals, just by forking over \$100 to \$2,500 Cdn.

Derek Pyne, a Thompson Rivers University economist who was granted tenure in 2015, is among the global academics who are exposing the deceptive journals, sometimes at a risk to their careers. Experts say these journals are chipping away at scientific, medical and educational credibility — and wasting the money of the taxpayers who largely finance public colleges and universities.

Pyne's pioneering research has been cited by The New York Times and The Chronicle of Higher Education. On June 23, The Economist, in a piece on blacklisted journals, praised the B.C. scholar, remarking: “This is an area in which data are hard to come by. But one academic has been prepared to stick his neck out and investigate his own institution.”

His dedication to truth, however, has not gone well for Pyne, who might be turning into one of the most noted professors at Thompson Rivers University. He has been at the public Kamloops institution since 2010, specializing in economic and mathematical theory related to education, religion, trade and crime.

On July 17, however, Pyne was suspended without pay. That's after being banned on May 17 from the picturesque campus on a Kamloops hillside.

Pyne, 54, has been in a grim dispute with university administrators, the human resources department and some faculty since he began working on a paper that was published in April 2017 in the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, which is produced by the University of Toronto.

Pyne's paper reported many administrators and faculty in the business and economics department at the university had articles in some of the 12,000 journals on a blacklist created by Jeffrey Beall, a librarian at the University of Colorado. Beall tallied the journals that, among other things, generally demand fees and don't bother with peer review, the traditional process through which independent experts scrutinize manuscripts.

Pyne's peer-reviewed paper describes how about half of more than three dozen faculty in TRU's school of business and economics appear to have published, sometimes frequently, in journals blacklisted by Beall.

Pyne's provocative paper didn't name Thompson Rivers University, which has 13,000 on-campus students and another 13,000 distance learners, or the often highly paid faculty and administrators he put under analysis. But it eventually became known that the paper was describing the way that many TRU academics who had published in blacklisted journals, including one with 10 such articles, were often awarded with research grants or promotions.

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"Actually, it's my least technical article. But it's had the most attention," Pyne said.

Even though Pyne had a short opinion piece about his paper on rogue publishing printed in early 2017 in the *Ottawa Citizen*, it went basically unnoticed in Canada. Not so around the world.

Asked about the attention he's now receiving in international media outlets, Pyne, who earned his PhD at York University, said: "That part is almost vindication. A lot of economists read *The Economist*."

Still, Pyne's elevated profile has not protected him from a personnel war with TRU that threatens to crush his career, which has included research positions at European universities and at least 14 refereed articles in respected journals. The university's human-resources department on June 15 accused Pyne of using "defamatory language and accusations."

The president of TRU, Alan Shaver, would not comment on Pyne's suspension. A university spokeswoman said, "due to legal obligations to protect individual privacy, TRU does not share personal or private information related to matters involving our employees."

The president of the university's faculty association, Tom Friedman, said his organization "is not prepared to make any statement about the matter." He did not respond when asked if he was concerned about bogus journals.

Meanwhile, charges and counter-charges continue to fly among administrators, faculty and others at Thompson Rivers, which before 2004 was known as University College of the Cariboo.



'I have no doubt that he (Derek Pyne) is a man of high integrity,' says Prof. Hon Lam Chu, an economist at Memorial University of Newfoundland, where Pyne has taught. 'To me, he is very courageous.'

Postmedia is choosing, mainly for legal reasons, not to detail the accusations. Given the highly sensitive and complex nature of human resource disputes, it is almost impossible to prove the real reasons for Pyne's treatment by the university.

However, Pyne wrote in his Ottawa Citizen piece that before he published his article on deceptive journals, he had privately told TRU's dean, provost and others about his results.

"It did create friction with the dean, who did not appreciate my emails and other communications about the problem," Pyne wrote. "However, the truly surprising reaction was that there was absolutely no attempt to discuss my findings, verify the problem or otherwise address the issue."

TRU's president did not respond when asked if Pyne had told administrators TRU faculty were publishing in deceptive journals. Spokeswoman Darshan Lindsay instead sent an email generally describing TRU's hiring and promotion process, saying issues around deceptive journals "are not unique to TRU," but are being faced by universities across the globe.

"Given the independent nature of publishing and scholarship, TRU does not monitor the publishing activity of faculty. However, divisional peer review committees and a university committee of senate review publishing credentials during the tenure and promotion

process.” The spokeswoman said promotion “includes close scrutiny of publications” by faculty, department chairs and deans.

Many publishers named in blacklists are astonishingly fake. Most use names similar to legitimate journals, pretend to do peer reviews and even fabricate citations. Grammatical errors are common.

A University of Sussex psychologist, Katarzyna Pisanski, launched a sting operation and persuaded dozens of bogus journals to appoint her an editor, with no responsibilities, based on a totally fabricated curriculum vitae.

Publishers of some journals feign to hold conferences with big-name speakers that never happen. Bo-Christer Bjork, of the Hanken School of Economics in Finland, estimates the number of articles published in disputed journals has shot up from about 53,000 a year in 2010 to more than 400,000 today.

Pyne is not the only one who has run into ugly career troubles after exposing this growing realm of deceptive, often online journals, many of which have no physical addresses but appear to operate outside North America and Europe. Vested interests are quick to retaliate.

American Jeffrey Beall’s career took a hard hit after he published his blacklist.

Beall claims to have been subjected to pressure, a misconduct investigation and threats of lawsuits by publishers. Anonymous fake internet accounts continue to outrageously malign him online. Beall stopped adding to his list last year and left his job at the University of Colorado. The university denies wrongdoing, according to *The Economist*, and says it was Beall’s decision to take down the blacklist. Beall could not be reached.

Whatever the reality behind Beall’s clash with his university administrators, the blacklist he started has been taken over and republished by another custodian, who refuses to be named, but who has added 700 more journals.

Meanwhile, Cabell’s, an established analytics company in Texas, has compiled a second blacklist of 8,700 untrustworthy journals, many of which overlap with the one started by Beall.

Wide support

Many of Pyne’s colleagues stand up, privately and publicly, for his ethical standards.

“I have no doubt that he is a man of high integrity,” says Prof. Hon Lam Chu, an economist at Memorial University of Newfoundland, where Pyne has taught. “To me, he is very courageous and sometimes so outspoken that he speaks out what he believes and will not back off even in front of the powers that be.”

Zena Sheldon, professor emerita in TRU’s economics department, says Pyne is not driven by ego.

“Derek is a well-read, deep-thinking, honest man and a good economist. While he is, in my opinion, a bit stubborn, that is arguably a typical academic characteristic,” Sheldon said.

“Can Derek take unpopular positions and continue holding them? Yes. Is it possible he refuses to be converted by others even if they are right? Yes. But I do not see him as being driven by ego, nor a desire to win per se. I believe he is driven by an insatiable desire for the truth. Even if he is wholly wrong, which I frankly doubt in this case, he is *compos mentis*.”

Pyne is also a responsible economics teacher who has served on academic committees and TRU’s senate, Sheldon said. Even though Sheldon believes Pyne was more skeptical than he needs to be about TRU’s new masters program in economics, she respects he arrives at his views with an ethical and scrupulous attention to details.

Sheldon said it is often a daunting process to try to get published in respectable journals, especially if one goes against the trends in one’s field. “But,” she said, “I do not want to get ahead by cheating as an alternative.”

Unlike shadowy academic journals, Pyne said, legitimate ones typically have anonymous reviewers who require submitters to make two or more revisions to their papers.

That’s not the case with questionable publications, which Beall and others initially called “predatory” journals, referring to the way they allegedly take advantage of naive scholars by offering them publication for a fee, in an emerging model known as “open access,” which allows people to read the results for nothing.

More and more people now think “predatory” is a misleading term, since many academics, rather than being preyed on, are using the journals to climb the academic ladder.

Even though Pyne acknowledges some academics might “get duped” by such journals, he believes “when hundreds of thousands of publications appear in predatory journals, it stretches credulity to believe all the authors and universities they work for are victims.”

Fixing the problem

How can integrity be returned to academic publishing?

The renowned science journal Nature says the solution “requires targeting the problem at its core, by making publishing in illegitimate journals less attractive.” More than six per cent of American academic papers, Finland’s Bjork estimates, appear in deceptive journals.

Some administrators are looking the other way. Pyne speculates some colleges and universities that emphasize teaching over research and are eager to recruit students, may find it cheaper to not require faculty to go through the time-consuming process of trying to get published in quality journals.

Some may be “turning a blind eye,” he said, as faculty pad their online resumés and impress would-be students with articles in journals that few would realize are suspect. The government officials who supposedly monitor academia may not have the expertise or time to recognize all the deception.

The rise of rogue journals has in part come out of well-meaning new requirements by governments in both Canada and the U.S. that any research funded by taxpayers should be published in journals that permit open access, many of which are legitimate. It's a different system from the past, when most journals required subscriptions.

The new blacklists may help college and university hiring committees spot deceit. But the lists are said to be imperfect and thus controversial, sometimes mixing merely low-quality journals with deceptive ones. As a result "whitelists" of credible journals are also emerging.

Pyne is among those who think it may be time to return to the traditional approach of paying subscriptions to read scholarly publications, especially since such subscriptions are often covered by college and university libraries.

He is not the only one who believes big research universities, such as UBC, aren't as vulnerable as smaller institutions to unprincipled publishers and the academics who use them. The hiring committees at major universities, he said, are expected to know the difference between bona fide journals and those merely out for profit. But no one is immune.

dtodd@postmedia.com
[@douglastodd](#)