Viewpoints

ORCID: the challenge ahead

Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva
Japan; jaimetex@yahoo.com

ORCID, which stands for Open Researcher and Contributor ID, launched in late 2012 and has rapidly accumulated over 3 million registrants in the past four years, with numbers expected to reach 3.141 million users, or Greek pi (π), by March 14, 2017[1]. Several of the mainstream publishers have been involved in this initiative since inception, including, but not exclusively Elsevier, Springer Nature and Wiley, and this initiative could be one of the greatest, in terms of size and impact, in academic publishing since the turn of the century. As indicated by Alice Meadows, the ORCID Community Engagement & Support Director, on February 21, 2017, the parties involved are heavily invested in this project, with 650 organizational members, the launch of about 300 integrations, and the assistance of about 60 ORCID ambassadors. Ed Pentz of CrossRef, which manages digital object identifiers (DOIs), is the chair of the board of directors of ORCID Inc., a nonprofit based in Delaware in the USA[2].

So what exactly is ORCID and why is it so important for the publishing industry? ORCID is not a random event. It is a highly coordinated project that has emerged to deal with identification-related complexities in research and publishing related to bioscience, the humanities, and associated businesses and fields linked to academia. ORCID is the assignment of a unique number, or identifier, to an author or individual that populate wide publishing and academic pools, and allows publishers and peers to correctly identify and associate specific individuals with publications. ORCID functions somewhat like a DOI, which serves as a unique identification scheme for published works. By having a coordinated system that is able to identify an author, using an ORCID, and match that author to a published paper, which carries a DOI, the hope is that ambiguities within publishing can start to be eliminated.

How do ambiguities arise, and when? There are instances where an individual may get married, and the family name may change, and in cases where the married name substitutes the maiden name in published papers, readers might not be aware that in fact different papers over a space of time with two apparently different names might in fact be written by the same person. Culture also has an extremely important role to play in the current difficulties of disambiguation of identities. For example, Brazilian authors may have many (in some cases, half a dozen or more) family names, and these might be abbreviated, or some names might be removed to simplify publication. In other cases, some journals impose rules such as abbreviated first names in published works. Many scientists from Indonesia, for example only have one name, while in a country like China, a family name like Zhang, Chen or Chang may result in many thousands of hits on academic data-bases or Google Scholar, making a thorough search literally impossible, even more so when the first name is abbreviated. Thus, the only way to diplomatically deal with these ID-based ambiguities in a culturally-sensitive manner, is to implement a system like ORCID.

Although the problem described next does not yet seem to have emerged, most likely because the implementation of ORCID by members is still largely voluntary, the issue of individual rights (such as the right to choose to have an ORCID, or not) and thus freedom of speech and/or choice will become central to the discussion. This will occur as more and more publishers, and their journals, begin to forcefully implement ORCID on their authorship, as is already taking place at Wiley, for example. As ORCID starts to trend towards an obligatory state, which is increasingly going to be a reality as the number of registrants exceeds a certain threshold, global academia may see a rift into pro- and anti-ORCID camps. So, the future of ORCID, although apparently successful as we tend to pi, might not usher in a smooth transition as it becomes more forcefully imposed.

Why then is there this active push to implement ORCID, especially in the past few months, and even more so since the start of 2017? The ORCID project is now beyond the testing and beta phases. It is now in the expansion and cementing phase, integrating closely with institutions, societies and publishers. This means that the number of rules and regulations, checks and verifications has increased exponentially, in what appears to be an increase in "militarization" in academics[3].

The challenge for ORCID will be to accommodate academics without being Orwellian, while still respecting academics' right of choice.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest. The author does not have an ORCID.

References

1 https://orcid.org/; http://www.piday.org/. Accessed: 24 February, 2017

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ORCID. Accessed: 24 February, 2017

3 Teixeira da Silva JA. The militarization of science, and subsequent criminalization of scientists. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Medicine* 2016;1(2):214-215. DOI: 10.1515/jim-2016-0031