Public Deception as Ideological and Institutional Critique: On the Limits and Possibilities of Academic Hoaxing

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ABSTRACT

Background Through an exploration of two influential academic hoaxes, the Sokal Affair and the "Grievance Studies" hoax, this article explores the constraints and possibilities of academic hoaxing in the articulation of institutional critique through a discussion of academic integrity and ethical forms of deception.

Analysis In this article, hoaxes are cast as operating on a continuum with other covert forms of deception in academic publishing (fraud, data fabrication, misconduct). Far from producing constructive outcomes, these interventions serve as flashpoints for stirring up discipline-based anxieties and ideologically motivated attacks.

Conclusion and implications These forms of public deception can illuminate how to reform or re-envision areas of academia that are compromising the health and vitality of academic research.

Keywords Hoaxing; Deception; Media discourse; Peer review; Academic misconduct; Higher education

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte À partir d'une étude de deux importants canulars universitaires—l'affaire Sokal (1996) et le canular «grievance studies» (2018)—cet article explore les contraintes et les possibilités du canular universitaire comme forme de critique institutionnelle à travers une discussion sur l'intégrité des chercheurs et l'éthique de l'imposture.

Analyse Dans cet essai, les canulars rentrent dans la même catégorie que les fraudes dans l'édition universitaire (fabrication de données, inconduite, fraude). Loin de produire des résultats constructifs, ces interventions servent de foyer pour attiser des conflits entre les disciplines et favorisent des attaques idéologiques.

Conclusion et implications Ces formes d'impostures publiques peuvent révéler des façons de réformer ou de revoir certains aspects du monde universitaire qui compromettent la santé et la vitalité du milieu de la recherche.

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Introduction

In 1996, New York University (NYU) physics professor Alan Sokal ignited a maelstrom of critical debate in the halls of academe in both North America and France with the publication of his now (in)famous hoax essay, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" (Bouilloud, 2003). The story begins when Sokal (1996a) published an intentionally nonsensical essay in *Social Text*, a leading American cultural studies journal with a reputation for publishing difficult, obscure, and contentious scholarship engaging critical theory. Sparks flew soon after the essay's publication, when Sokal revealed his work to be nothing more than an elaborate hoax meant to critique both the postmodern philosophy and the social constructivist approach the journal championed. The hoax greatly embarrassed the journal's editors and its editorial collective for having published an essay that lacked academic integrity. In the aftermath, academics on both sides of the Atlantic engaged in heated debate on topics ranging from the (il)legitimacy of postmodernism to academic integrity to the value of higher education.

Over twenty years later, a group of three independent researchers emulating Sokal embarked on a year-long experiment in which they wrote twenty bogus articles and submitted them for publication; seven were accepted for publication in peer-reviewed journals. As Yascha Mounk (2018) remarks, many of the editors and peer reviewers taken in by the hoax articles failed to recognize the difference between "real scholarship and intellectually vacuous as well as morally troubling bullshit" (para. 5). Having targeted marginalized journals and disciplines in the arts, social sciences, and humanities, the hoax was designed to discredit researchers who purportedly "prize victimhood, repudiate science and logic, and extol activism over inquiry" (Heying, 2018, para. 1). To some commentators, however, the hoaxers were responsible for unethical, bad-faith articles based on fraudulent data. Despite having created a veritable media spectacle, the authors were deemed to be more invested in mean-spirited mockery than in a substantive critique of the targeted disciplines (Bergstrom, 2018).

As public forms of deception that are closely monitored across mediated public spheres, academic hoaxes serve as vital points of departure for examining the current state of institutionalized academic life and culture. Just as hoaxes typically divide audiences by creating a broader framework for polarization, the critical potential of academic hoaxing remains unclear. Building on Kevin Young's (2017) assertion that "hindsight is the hoax's best light" (p. 96), this article examines two significant hoaxes that produced polarizing discussion among academics, journalists, and popular media commentators. Given the negative and destructive character of these events in the realm of academia, it not only examines the limits and constraints of academic hoaxing but also addresses the possible merits of these activities through a broader discussion of academic integrity and ethical forms of deception.

Hoaxing and deception

As ambiguous forms of communication that channel deception, humour, and mischief

in the targeting of victims and the approbation of audiences, hoaxes have certainly earned their place of notoriety in both private and public spheres of influence. For over two centuries, hoaxing has retained a great deal of elasticity in terms of its broader application and interpretation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson & Weiner, 1989) refers to hoaxing as a "humorous or mischievous deception, usually taking the form of a fabrication of something fictitious or erroneous, told in such a manner as to impose upon the credulity of the victim" (p. 273). By way of comparison, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2020) characterizes hoaxing as "an act intended to trick or dupe; something accepted or established by fraud or fabrication." While agreement on the humorous nature of hoaxing is absent, the use of intentional deception, trickery, and fabrication is foregrounded to highlight core features and dynamics. Hoaxing does involve malice and/or humour in the perpetuation of dishonest acts or statements that conceal or misrepresent a more accurate state of affairs (Reilly, 2018). Not to be confused with related concepts such as humbug, satire, fraud, parafiction, culture jamming, or interventionist art, hoaxing occupies a middle ground between the prank and the con, working both to deceive and be discovered; as James Fredal (2014) insists, "its truth wants out" (p. 78). Whereas scam artists and fraudsters tend to conceal the existence of any trickery (Fleming & O'Carroll, 2010) and pranksters outwardly leverage deception for fun and audience entertainment (McLeod, 2014), hoaxers seek credit to shore up public notoriety and fame.

Distinctions among hoaxer, target, and audience are of crucial importance: "the target is the object of ridicule; the audience, the object of entertainment and instruction" (Fredal, 2014, p. 76). One element of hoaxing is inescapable: savvy hoaxers will effectively blindside their targets by appealing to their own assumptions and preconceptions, their own self-importance, or their own nearsightedness (Secor & Walsh, 2004). When hoaxes are particularly successful in attracting attention, they work to coerce the audience into a kind of complicity whereby the latter become collaborators innocently colluding with the hoaxer; as Young (2017) points out, "the hoaxer just gets there first, making unwilling co-conspirators of us all" (p. 446).

All hoaxes are temporal events that must be public, involve deception, and be staged (Secor & Walsh 2004). For the acts of deception to rise to the level or status of a hoax, they must command and sustain the public's attention. To capture the popular imagination, the hoax must offer something sensational, dramatic, unusual, or ingenious (Boese, 2002). Hoaxes are thus textual events that draw upon traditional rhetorical techniques of probability and improbability to shift audiences from credulity and acceptance to doubt and disbelief. Throughout this process, hoaxers must also demonstrate a mastery of rhetorical and generic conventions to mock and ridicule targets effectively enough to entertain or instruct the audience (Fredal, 2014). As will become clear, "a good hoaxer is a very skilled reader and manipulator of textual genres and often specialized discourses" (Fleming & O'Carroll, 2010, p. 45). Hoaxes do not, however, constitute a distinct genre; rather, they mimic the features of the host genre (e.g., a news report, scholarly article, website, memoir, historical account, or radio address) (Fredal, 2014). As Harry Collins (2016) remarks, hoaxes must resemble the real thing: "in an ideal hoax the resemblance will be all in the 'form' with no resemblance in con-

text" (p. 78). More specifically, hoaxes engage in the reproduction or parodying of genres, passing the fake as authentic (Secor & Walsh, 2004). In this regard, hoaxers enjoy a great deal of freedom in their activities, producing the conditions for artfulness and ambiguity to emerge: "Not bound by the facts, the hoax is free to fabricate feelings and the genres associated with them" (Young, 2017, p. 18). It is in this self-fashioned environment that hoaxers push to discredit the host genre and its stand-in target, all the while championing themselves as the heroes of their own story, that of a fake conveying a higher truth (Fredal, 2014).

The didactic, pedagogical, or "educative potential" (Walsh, 2006, p. 169) of the hoax is by now well established. At their best, hoaxes can "expose presumptions, attitudes, and beliefs, and ultimately enable a momentary depolarization of opinion, which can be very helpful in stimulating discourse" (O'Neil, 2007, p. 302). Conversely, given the form's protean qualities and malleability, hoaxes can also spur greater division and polarization through ideological posturing and critique—a distinct feature of the two academic hoaxes discussed below. One final consideration of this article centres on the extent to which academic hoaxes can be designed and executed to produce generative discourse and insight. Before embarking on a closer examination of these hoaxes, this article will first establish the contours of, and contexts for, thinking about academic hoaxing.

Academic hoaxes

Various forms of deception exist in academic research, much of which has earned a dubious and even contemptible history (Nadler, 2014). Outside the more historically fraught disciplines, such as experimental psychology, deception has been leveraged in experiments as contributions to knowledge. According to John Schuerman (1990), cost-benefit analyses have served as common principles to justify deception in certain fields, especially "when the costs to subjects are virtually nil or when the anticipated benefits of the research are substantial and there is no other way to investigate the topic" (p. 60). In keeping with the above definition of hoaxing as mischievous or humorous forms of deception played out in the public arena, this article will limit the discussion of academic hoaxing to the realm of academic publishing. Although hoaxing activities in academia are certainly not limited to published works (conference presentations, internet/news media appearances, April Fool's Day press releases), the prevalence of hoaxing in academic literature—as well as the broader discussion and debate they generate—makes this form of deception a most valuable focal point.

Competition in higher education has a long history, particularly among research universities (Musselin, 2018), and various struggles over legitimacy have given rise to rivalries and divisions across the institution. T.H. Huxley's 1894 statement on the intrinsic value of the university as having "merely to do with pure knowledge and pure art" (as cited in Collini, 2016, p. 31) is particularly apt, as it celebrates one of the institution's foundational tenets. Who exactly produces this knowledge and art has, and continues to be, the subject of much heated debate. Universities have long participated in the creation of a core mystification: "The false idea that any one discipline or profession possesses the key to objective reality which entitles its experts to legislate policy for their less gifted or credentialed fellow citizens" (Michael, 1996, p. 128). If we accept

that any and all disciplinary claims to epistemological legitimacy are fraught, if we concede that the "interdisciplinary university is not always a peaceful place" (Sokal, 1996b, para. 1), and if we acknowledge that hoaxes tend to flourish in "contest cultures" (Fredal, 2014, p. 76), it follows that academia constitutes fertile ground for hoaxing. In academia, hoaxes are intimately bound up in shaping public discussion surrounding what counts as truth (Walsh, 2006). More specifically, hoaxes serve as dramatizations of broader contestations over the status of truth, acts that seek to raise questions about the processes and standards by which claims and knowledge are attributed legitimacy (Hynes, Sharpe, & Greig, 2012).

Stages and features of academic hoaxing

Academic hoaxes unfold in sequential stages and are also ascribed certain features. Hoaxes in academic publishing are punctuated by two phases: "*the entrapment* (when an article is submitted to, and published by, a targeted journal) and *the reveal* (when said article is exposed as a fake in a follow-up piece that explains and justifies the hoaxer's motivations)" (Spera & Peña-Guzmán, 2019, p. 160).[1] Once a hoax materializes, its core features appear front and centre: intention, revelation, and convention (Hynes et al., 2012). The hoaxer's intentions are of critical importance in deciphering the purported meaning of a hoax (e.g., to shame or embarrass a target, critique a field or discipline, devalue higher education); as will become apparent, hoaxes of this kind are designed specifically to be debunked, with the hoaxer usually prepared or willing to explain what was done and why (Katsoulis, 2013). The revelation of the hoax is designed to ensure that the target is clearly identified and embarrassed. The mastery of both convention and genre (imitating the conventions of natural or social sciences research) prepare the way for the hoax to pass as true, thereby enabling the hoaxer to implicitly and explicitly undermine the target.

The cumulative effect of bringing a successful hoax to fruition can never be fully measured but the ripple effects are clear. Because its practitioners broker in the "comic unmasking of the gullibility of others," academic hoaxes do not register as "particularly kind or gentle rhetorical events" (Secor & Walsh, 2004, p. 72). Indeed, it is altogether rare that a target prove more fascinated and bemused than angry or embarrassed (Young, 2017). These deceptions are all the more stinging when the targets of the hoax are experts in a given field (e.g., scholars/researchers). The ethical problems underpinning the circulation of deliberate lies are clear; in addition, the deployment of humour or ridicule in certain instances is at once unethical and mean-spirited (Fleming & O'Carroll, 2010). As such, hoaxes have the capacity to trigger resentment and dismissiveness, a divisive element that can signal the splitting of audience/readership into two groups: those consonant with the hoaxer and those duped and later embarrassed (Secor & Walsh, 2004). The destructive potential of hoaxes is made most evident when they are "undertaken to show the superiority of one idea over another … Its outcome is only a deepening of polarized views, a hardening of differences, ideological fragmentation, and heated argument" (O'Neil, 2007, p. 302).

If, as Collins (2016) suggests, academic hoaxes lack the power to redefine the epistemological foundations of a given field, their impact can be felt more tangibly in other areas connected to the individual or institution: the loss of prestige/reputation or limits

on funding, publication avenues, hiring practices, tenure and promotion, career advancement, material or institutional resources, curriculum development, student enrollment, and so on (Petrzela, 2018; Slack & Semati, 1997; Spera & Peña-Guzmán, 2019). Academic hoaxes seek to influence how value is assigned in relation to what aspects of academia are deemed legitimate. As Rebecca Spera and David Peña-Guzmán (2019) have shown in the realm of philosophy, acts of hoaxing "operate according to the logic of legitimation by force" to shore up who and what does and does not count; these acts ultimately teach us more about the "power relations that permeate different professions than about the discourses they target" (p. 157). Furthermore, in the event that hoaxes do reach broader audiences via sustained news media coverage, discourses of anti-intellectualism and anti-liberalism figure prominently, as do depictions of the culture wars.

    In what follows, this article situates academic hoaxing as operating on a continuum with other undesirable forms of conduct within academic publishing, such as academic dishonesty, research misconduct, and intellectual malfeasance. Despite the very real destructive aspects tied to these practices, hoaxing is not restricted to solely producing negative outcomes or dangerous consequences within academia. Rather, the exercise of hoaxing can also be ethically designed and executed to produce generative forms of alternative feedback surrounding academic peer-review and publishing practices. One journal editor's inquiry into the decision-making practices of editorial peer review, for example, presents an alternative view of how ethical forms of hoaxing could materialize as public forms of deception that do not seek to openly vilify, humiliate, or embarrass targeted figures or fields in the academy.

"Differing approaches to truth": The Sokal Affair

The first case study has been described as a flashpoint for protest against a perceived "collapse in standards of scholarship and intellectual responsibility" (Boghossian, 1998, p. 31) across the humanities and social sciences. The publication of NYU physicist Alan Sokal's 1996 hoax essay in the cultural studies journal *Social Text* proved the perfect vehicle to reinforce this long-held claim. Despite the presence of numerous false claims and nonsensical argumentation, Sokal's (1996a) essay, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," was reviewed and vetted by five members of the journal's editorial collective for inclusion in a special double issue entitled "The Science Wars" (ERV, 2002). According to Sokal (2000), he was engaging in a "modest (though admittedly uncontrolled) experiment: Would a leading North American journal of cultural studies … publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if a) it sounded good and b) it flattered the editors' ideological preconceptions? The answer, unfortunately, is yes" (p. 49). In failing to properly vet the article, both the journal and its editors fell prey to the deception and were largely written off as lacking rigour and credibility, giving rise to public embarrassment and ridicule. Both the premise and conceit of the deception proved all too irresistible for observers across mainstream news media, so much so that the hoax (soon to be labelled the Sokal Affair) was "taken up in the media in proportions befitting a major political scandal" (Slack & Semati, 1997, p. 202). By ironically endorsing the notion that scientists had no special claim to scientific knowledge (Ruark, 2017), Sokal was instrumental in dra-

matizing the polarization of two dominant and "differing approaches to truth" (Hynes et al., 2012, p. 288): objectivism and constructionism. The so-called science wars became the centre of a "stark disagreement" between defenders of "objective truth" (Linker, 2001, p. 59) and scientific rationality, and epistemic relativist and science studies scholars skeptical of value-neutrality and objectivity in scientific research.

In the early 1990s, scientists began to feel the threat posed by the academic left, likening the critique of science to a "frontal assault on 'civilization as we know it'" (Fuller, 1995, p. 34). During this period, the growing influence of science studies was deemed a legitimate threat to the hard sciences because the demystification of scientific research left less room for scientists to claim full dominion over truth and knowledge production (Michael, 1996). As one cultural critic noted at the time, the emergence of the history and philosophy of science also had the uncomfortable effect of pushing otherwise insulated scientists to confront science directly (Kimball, 1996). On the one hand, science studies scholars were highlighting the urgency with which science had to be held publicly accountable to society (Linker, 2001) in the interests of "democracy-advancing projects" (Harding, 1996, p. 18).[2] On the other hand, natural scientists' core criticism of science studies (or postmodernism) was that epistemology was being forsaken in favour of ideology at the expense of incontrovertible truths (e.g., the laws of physics) (Truscello, 2011); a common grievance in this camp was the theorist's misappropriation of scientific literature and terminology and the intellectual bastardization of scientific knowledge. However, not all accounts of the science and culture wars were divisive: philosophers and scientists both failed to reflect on their power and authority as scholars capable of shaping knowledge on behalf of people occupying different socio-economic categories (Linker, 2001). A tempered response would also appear in an editorial in *Nature* (1997) citing that many working scientists accepted the constructivists' critique regarding social processes, all the while reaffirming that science should not be regarded as a purely social construction. Cornell University physicist Kurt Gottfried (1997) went even further, insisting that "mere polemics would not do" (p. 62) as non-scientific audiences deserved thoughtful and persuasive argumentation.

It is against this backdrop that Sokal painstakingly reproduced and exploited the conventions of the *Social Text* article format, with an emphasis on critical/ideological stance, citation, topoi, and style (Walsh, 2006); indeed, in mimicking these features to the letter, he was able to shore up the credibility and authority needed to ensure the hoax's publication. Despite the breach of trust perpetrated by Sokal (involving the wilful deception of the *Social Text* editors), he positioned himself as wanting to initiate "dialogue on the Left between humanists and natural scientists—'two cultures' which … are probably farther apart in mentality than at any time in the past 50 years" (Bricmont & Sokal, 1998, p. 248). To make this claim all the more plausible, Sokal carefully eschewed the label of hoax, embracing the friendlier critical genres of *parody* and *satire* to ensure that he and his audience were on the same side (Secor & Walsh, 2004). Sokal's embrace of parody was significant for two reasons: publishing a parodic text would arguably increase the likelihood that the article would be read, and it would also downplay the transgression of duping the editorial collective of a non-refereed journal that accepted his work in good faith.[3] At his best, Sokal (1998) offered two

claims as to what his hoax did and did not prove: that the editors of a "rather marginal journal were derelict in their intellectual duty," and that his hoax "doesn't prove that the whole field of cultural studies, or cultural studies of science—much less sociology of science—is nonsense. Nor does it prove that the intellectual standards in these fields are generally lax" (p. 11). At his worst, he was totally dismissive of the scholarship produced in the pages of *Social Text*: "Postmodernism has three principal negative effects: a waste of time in the human sciences, a cultural confusion that favors obscurantism, and a weakening of the political left" (Bricmont & Sokal, 2011, p. 205). In addition to the initial deception, perhaps the gravest, most "academically irresponsible" act Sokal committed was to offer a "quick take" (Slack & Semati, 1997, p. 212) from outside an interdisciplinary field in which he lacked expertise. Sokal's efforts to create dialogue on the left cannot be taken at face value for two reasons. First, as Stephen Hilgartner pointed out, the hoax was designed to paint the academic humanities with the same brush, lumping a wide array of scholars together under the banner of postmodernism or relativism, regardless of the lack of interconnections among fields, disciplinary backgrounds, or research orientations (as cited in Ruark, 2017). Second, as Ellen Schrecker remarked in a recent oral history of the Sokal Affair, the hoaxer's greatest legacy is to have dismissed the larger cultural and political forces of the era, in favour of unwittingly contributing to the "culmination of 40 years of attacks on academic expertise" (as cited in Babich, 2019, p. 142). In short, Sokal's hoax has become shorthand for a much broader dismissal of university research on the left—especially in the humanities and social sciences.

It is thus difficult to disentangle the web of motivations underlying Sokal's hoax. Was he looking to embarrass the journal and its editors? Yes. Was he seeking to bridge the divide on the academic left? Quite possibly. Was he unevenly critiquing scholarship produced across the humanities and social sciences? Absolutely. Building on Paul Gross and Norman Levitt's (1994) attack of science studies in which the latter were criticized for rhetorical grandstanding devoid of well-researched argumentation (Truscello, 2011), Sokal was also cast as engaging in a form of academic bullying that foregrounded a "negative rhetorical process of belittlement, exaggeration and ultimately nonconstructive criticism" (O'Neil, 2007, p. 302). As Jennifer Slack and Mehdi Semati (1997) argue, these attacks on cultural studies were punctuated by a "glib, haughty, condescending tone [that worked] to cover over the lack of serious scholarship" (p. 220). Sokal would later admit that the real threat to the natural sciences was never postmodernism or science studies but rather the financing of research, more specifically, "the threat posed to scientific objectivity when public funding is increasingly replaced by private sponsorship (Bricmont & Sokal, 2011, p. 205).

For Sokal (1996b), "the interdisciplinary university is not always a peaceful place" (para. 1). The unease experienced around the institution at the time was due in part to rising research costs and steady declines in funding (Slack & Semati, 1997), not to mention the slow but eventual devaluation of the hard sciences in relation to the less well-funded and less well-regarded departments such as the humanities (Michael, 1996). Competition over funding, resources, and enrollment left academics across disciplines feeling increasingly besieged (Michael, 1996). In a now oft-cited phrase, James

Carey's assertion that "public resentment against higher education is real" (as cited in Wilson, 1995, p. 25) was deeply felt during this period. Indeed, the pronounced anti-intellectualism of the previous decade's culture wars produced fertile ground for the controversy to mushroom. The Sokal Affair would simultaneously exacerbate conflicts between the sciences and humanities and deepen conflicts within the left over what constitutes legitimate politics and education (Slack & Semati, 1997). If Sokal's ultimate goal was to advance dialogue and understanding between humanists and natural scientists, the deception-based discourse produced by the hoax failed in large part to create the inroads Sokal had arguably hoped for. In fact, the disciplinary and ideological tensions exacerbated during this period would resurface with even greater intensity in the second, albeit unrelated, iteration of Sokal's experiment: the "Grievance Studies" hoax.

Sokal Squared: The "Grievance Studies" hoax
Another wave of adversity in and beyond the academy would crest in October 2018 with the appearance of the "Grievance Studies" hoax, otherwise referred to in the press as "Sokal Squared." Helen Pluckrose (editor of the digital magazine *Areo*), James Lindsay (mathematics PhD), and Peter Boghossian (assistant professor of philosophy) co-authored and submitted twenty fake articles to peer-reviewed journals, seven of which were accepted for publication. The group devised and followed a loose set of criteria, with each hoax article having to engage at least one or more of the following: a humorous tone, ludicrous or outrageous theses, lack of rigour, amateurish construction, and little understanding of the field (Lindsay, Boghossian, & Pluckrose, 2018). The three skilled hoaxers targeted journals/fields they pejoratively call "Grievance Studies"—cultural studies, identity studies, and critical theory, among others—scholarship they characterize as "based less upon finding truth and more upon attending to social grievances" (Lindsay et al., 2018, para. 1). In their post-hoax revelation, they argue that scholars in these fields "increasingly bully students, administrators, and other departments into adhering to their worldview" (para. 1). In an attempt to better understand this facet of academia, they set out on a year-long experiment that saw them engage in what they called "a kind of reflexive ethnographic study" (para. 6). In an interesting variation on the form, this project was envisioned as both an academic hoax and a research project. Having garnered a great deal of attention and commentary from academics and journalists alike, this staged deception provides a second critical case study through which to evaluate academic hoaxing.

Support for an academic hoax of this kind will often take two forms: open critique on the part of scholars and researchers from other disciplines/institutions, and an institutional critique of the university and higher education as a whole. As an example of the former, Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker (2018) snidely tweeted the following: "Is there any idea so outlandish that it won't be published in a Critical/PoMo/Identity/'Theory' journal?" Exemplifying the latter, *The Baffler* writer Jarek Ervin (2018) wrote that "we do not need more heroic defenses of the crumbling and corrupt institutions of higher education, nor should we hold onto the delusion that academia is inherently a beacon of progress and reason" (para. 32). In both instances, the hoax set in motion a cynical affirmation of the shortcomings of certain

branches of scholarly inquiry and a desire to see academia more for what it is: a highly dysfunctional place. Other commentators

- praised the hoax for its humour and hilarity, while also lamenting how easily "morally troubling bullshit" (Mounk, 2018, para. 5) can make its way through peer review;
- agreed with the general premise of the critique—that these marginalized fields "prize victimhood, repudiate science and logic, and extol activism over inquiry" (Heying, 2018, para. 1), a feature that inspired one researcher to leave academia altogether; or
- supported academic hoaxing more generally as a historically significant form of intellectual inquiry and as a wellspring of creativity in the ongoing life of ideas (Smith, 2018).

Not to be outdone, even Alan Sokal came to the group's defence on the grounds that their "operation was initiated in the public interest, without any financial or professional benefit" (Lăzăroiu, 2019, p. 4).

Because the group made peer review the focal point of and gold standard for measuring the hoax's success, this form of deception differs from the previous case study in important ways. Whereas *Social Text* editors closely scrutinized Sokal's essay in the lead-up to publication, it was not subjected to peer review (Grossberg, 2018); in addition, Sokal (1996b) designed his standalone hoax with a companion revelation piece slated to appear in the journal *Lingua Franca*. The Sokal Squared hoaxers devised a more ambitious approach: to co-author and submit twenty articles designed to clear peer review through covert deception. Unlike Sokal, who cleverly plotted his post-hoax revelation, Lindsay, Boghossian, and Pluckrose were exposed prematurely by an investigative journalist at *The Wall Street Journal* who forced the group's hand in ending their hoaxing experiment, prompting a publicly manufactured rationale for the deception (see Melchior, 2018). As part of their reveal, they published an article and a short documentary-style YouTube exposé of themselves in action (shared 54,000 times), "unmasking what they called academe's leftist, victim-obsessed ideological slant and low publishing standards" (Kafka, 2018, para. 1). Their articles on dog-park canine rape culture, fat bodybuilding, dildos, "breastaurants," ironic social justice scholarship, moon meetings, and "a feminist rewrite of a chapter from Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*"—all of which were accepted for publication—served to illustrate just how easily "shoddy, absurd, unethical and politically-biased papers" (as cited in Hughes & Aldous, 2018, para. 19) could make their way through peer review.

Sokal Squared generated a great deal of critical debate about the merits and shortcomings of the academic hoax, with much of the controversy centring on deception in peer review. As James Taylor (2018) suggests, the main point of the hoax seems to have been to highlight that some poor-quality articles get published in marginal journals and far less frequently in mainstream journals. Contrary to their boast of having published work in the top targeted fields, four of the journals in which their work was accepted were ranked fifth, eighth, twenty-fourth, and twenty-seventh out of 42 journals in women's studies; the other three journals were not listed in Journal Citation Reports (Hughes & Aldhous, 2018). A basic overview of their year-long experiment

yielded the following insights: "77% of their submissions were rebuffed, they failed to publish *anything* in 66% of the journals they submitted to, and 42% of their papers were never granted so much as [a Revise & Resubmit], often despite multiple publication attempts" (Al-Gharbi as cited in Soave, 2019, para. 12).

The group engaged in more elaborate forms of deception than Sokal in order to have seven of their articles accepted for publication. The hoaxers were consistently criticized for exploiting collegiality and undermining respect for scholarship by submitting knowingly deceptive research designed to humiliate journals, editors, and reviewers.[4] To understand this breach, it is vital to understand the nature and function of peer review. Scholarly integrity and intellectual honesty form the kernel of this endeavour, a process that is at times muddied by the human predisposition to dishonesty and mischief-making (Piedra, 2019). As Lisette Piedra (2019) writes, "the peer review system operates on good will and human judgment; as such, it is inherently flawed … For editors, every accepted manuscript holds a measure of risk. We assume the work has not been plagiarized, reproduced elsewhere, or results falsified" (p. 154). The system is not designed to detect or root out fraud; rather, one explicitly stated purpose of peer review is to evaluate scholarship and to improve promising manuscripts (Bergstrom, 2018; Lăzăroiu, 2019; Piedra, 2019). In short, academic journals expect fair submissions. In the absence of professional integrity and honesty, the system is susceptible to the kinds of deception perpetrated by Pluckrose, Lindsay, and Boghossian.

Due to the nature of the hoax, the charge of academic misconduct warrants closer attention. One editorial in *Educational Philosophy and Theory* exclaimed that the hoax constituted the (im)perfect constellation of postmodernist philosophy, academic dishonesty, and shoddy peer review (Lăzăroiu, 2019). Scholars impacted directly by Sokal Squared published editorials in which they characterized the broader hoax as maliciously deceitful (Yoder, 2018) and as violating ethical and academic norms (Taylor, 2018). For many the hoax had more in common with notorious examples of scientific fraud (Hughes & Aldhous, 2018); for others still, it was disingenuous on the part of the hoaxers to suggest that rigour, integrity, and honesty are lacking in social sciences and humanities alone because they wilfully omitted reference to other forms of fabricated and bad-faith "objective" research (Kolata, 2018).[5] Carl Bergstrom (2018) went so far as to argue that the hoax was not only ethically indefensible, but that it represented straight-up academic misconduct. For example, in the authors' dog-park rape culture essay, "they made outlandish arguments founded on fake data" (Petrzela, 2018, para. 2); in it, the authors claim to have observed over 10,000 dogs and over 1,000 hours of "dog humping patterns" (London, 2019, para. 6). Given his status as a tenure-track faculty member at Portland State University (PSU), Peter Boghossian (2019) was sanctioned for failing to obtain research ethics approval for research involving human subjects. It is likely that he drew increased scrutiny based not only on the fabrication of data and the failure to secure research ethics approval but also on the group's own admission of engaging in "a kind of reflexive ethnographic study" (para. 6). Having addressed their desire to interface with reviewers and editors as part of their experiment to better understand the field (Lindsay et al., 2018), the group invited the academic community to interpret their work as research involving human subjects,

regardless of their claims to having engaged in academic parody or satire (Ashley, 2019). To better assess this hoax—and academic hoaxing more generally—it is useful to consider this charge of academic misconduct in relation to other forms of academic deception.

Academic dishonesty, research misconduct, intellectual malfeasance

To situate the Sokal Squared hoax as academic dishonesty, research misconduct, or intellectual malfeasance is significant because it positions deception firmly within the realm of academic labour and publishing as something inherently disruptive and de-structive. While it is beyond the purview of this article to provide a thorough overview of research misconduct, a range of examples that threaten the epistemological foun-dations of the modern-day university is offered. To begin, Aja Romano (2015) offers a bleak summary of the current landscape:

> Between real reviewers attempting to scam authors for fake reviews, au-thors attempting to scam publications by creating fake reviewers to create fake reviews, editors playing both sides by creating fake reviewers and as-signing them to real papers, third-party services doing all of the above, and fake academic journals accepting all of these papers regardless of their levels of fabrication, it's hard to know how to keep the integrity of the aca-demic publishing process intact. (para. 22)

As Romano (2015) puts it, the degree to which researchers and academics will engage in deception is at once vast and variable. Data fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism are among the most egregious examples of fraudulent activity, with researchers in psy-chology, political science, cardiology, and medicine (among many others) being flagged or exposed for academic dishonesty. One staged anthropological discovery of primitive island dwellers in the Philippines (the Tasaday people) garnered global media attention largely due to the complicity of professional anthropologists in pro-nouncing their authenticity despite the fact that a "number of local residents had been hired by government officials to impersonate noble savages for the benefit of gullible consumers of the image" (Robin, 2004, p. 220). The Tasaday hoax (circa 1971) would later be unanimously described as an "artful hoax," while the anthropologists were la-belled "intellectual charlatans" (Robin, 2004, pp. 219–220). A leading anthropologist responsible for producing a missing link between Neanderthals and modern humans was exposed thirty years after having first falsified his findings (Harding, 2005). According to archaeologist Thomas Terberger, the scale of Reiner Protsch von Zieten's deception was so extensive that "anthropology is going to have to completely revise its picture of modern man between 40,000 and 10,000 years ago" (as cited in Harding, 2005, para. 5).

Other forms of academic misconduct include fake peer review, that is, editors sub-verting the peer-review process through the creation of fake reviewer accounts (Brainard & You, 2018).[6] In some instances, scientists, such as medicinal-plant re-searcher Hyung-In Moon, have exploited an email loophole in publishing-house databases, enabling them to use pseudonyms and bogus email addresses to facilitate the "peer review" of their own submissions. Once exposed, Moon's deception led to

the retraction of 28 articles and the resignation of an editor (Ferguson, Marcus, & Oransky, 2014). The retraction of academic scholarship has become such a problematic issue, particularly within open access medical journals, that entire websites are now devoted to monitoring these activities (e.g., Retraction Watch; Retraction Watch Database).[7] Journal editors have also been flagged for engaging in high-volume cross-citation among lesser-known journals to increase their journals' visibility and influence through higher impact ratings (journals participating in these schemes have been colloquially labelled "citation cartels") (Meyer, 2013). Elsewhere, researchers are publishing work in open access journals (OAJ) under a predominantly pay-to-publish model that does not subject the work to any form of peer review (Romano, 2015). In a 10-month experiment, science journalist John Bohannon submitted a fake scientific article about a cancer "wonder drug" to 304 OAJs to test the credibility and legitimacy of the academic publishers. Of the 304 submissions, 157 journals accepted the article, with 60 percent of the journals bypassing peer review altogether (Shaw, 2013). As Bohannon's (2013) experiment shows, the journals were less interested in the quality of the article and/or the rigours of peer review than they were in securing payment from the author.[8] It is worth noting that the Sokal Squared experiment began in 2017 with the OAJ publication of "The Conceptual Penis as a Social Construct" (2018), a hoax article that inadvertently exposed "the sham peer review process of a so-called 'predatory journal' [the Taylor & Francis-owned *Cogent Social Sciences*]" (Kahr, McHenry, & Hollingsworth, 2019, p. 5). Academics are lured to these journals through the promise of publishing in non-peer-reviewed journals that boast high impact factors and visibility across research networks such as Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar Citation, and Index Copernicus (Sevunts, 2019). Briefly rounding out the list of deceptive examples are computer-generated spoof articles and gibberish papers (e.g., "Get Me Off Your Fucking Mailing List") featured in both predatory pay-to-publish journals and established houses such as Springer (Van Noorden, 2014). All of the above forms of deception illustrate the need to curb academic misconduct and to introduce safeguards to protect against fake scholarship.

Both the Sokal and Sokal Squared controversies have shown that hoaxing in academia can be leveraged to discredit one's political opponents in broader mediated public spheres: for Sokal, it was the leftist academic humanists more generally, and less so the practitioners of science studies (Slack & Semati, 1997); for Lindsay, Boghossian, and Pluckrose, it was identity studies scholars working in the areas of gender, queer, and critical race studies. In these two high-profile case studies, the political opponents are selected as targets of public shaming and embarrassment for their perceived lack of scholarly rigour and integrity. Because the academic peer-review system is built on good faith and honesty—not to mention the unpaid labour of reviewers and editors—hoaxes of almost any stripe may appear if/when highly skilled actors present bad-faith arguments based on manufactured data (Beauchamp, 2018). If some of the larger goals of academic hoaxing are to stir up discipline-based anxieties and ideologically motivated attacks or to undermine the integrity of the peer-review process, these examples certainly pave the way for how best to continue this dubious critical project. Hoaxes, however, are not limited to producing solely negative or

destructive outcomes (O'Neil, 2007; Reilly, 2018; Walsh, 2006); rather, they can also be designed to produce generative feedback surrounding scholarship, peer review, and academic publishing. The final section of this article presents a glimpse of how ethical forms of academic hoaxing could materialize in the interests of producing meaningful feedback about academic labour and scholarship. One journal editor's inquiry into editorial decision-making practices in traditional academic publishing is presented to ground the discussion: a recent experiment carried out by University of Victoria geography professor Reuben Rose-Redwood (2018) entitled The Genocide Hoax.

Ethical academic hoaxing

Some background is needed to appreciate the full extent of Rose-Redwood's hoax. In 2017, political science professor Bruce Gilley published an article in *Third World Quarterly* in which he argued that colonialism was beneficial to the colonized and advocated for the recolonization of former colonies by Western powers (Rose-Redwood, 2018). On the heels of the article's publication, two petitions garnering over 18,000 signatures called for its immediate retraction.[9] Parent company Taylor & Francis would eventually withdraw the piece not on ethical grounds but due to credible threats of violence against the journal's editor, Shahid Qadir (Flaherty, 2017). How the essay came to be published was also a source of controversy—it was subjected to double-blind peer review and unanimously rejected by all three reviewers (Flaherty, 2017). Notwithstanding, the article eventually took wing as an opinion-style essay. Gilley's work has since been republished by the National Association of Scholars, under the guise of supporting academic freedom. Supporters of academic freedom created a petition of their own, arguing that academic journals and journal editors have a responsibility "to publish any work—however controversial—that in their view, merits exposure and debate" (Rose-Redwood, 2018, para. 13).[10] Among the signatories were over a dozen academic journal editors. Uncomfortable with the notion that editors of scholarly journals would support a case for colonialism, Rose-Redwood (himself the editor of *Dialogues in Human Geography*) would pose the question of whether these editors would go so far as to publish work advocating for genocide and ethnic cleansing.

Echoing Gilley's colonialism argument, Rose-Redwood (2018) sent a "hoax proposal for a special issue on 'The costs and benefits of genocide: Towards a balanced debate' to the thirteen journal editors who had signed the petition supporting the publication of 'The case for colonialism'" (para. 17). His goal was to learn whether these editors would consider hosting the special issue. Here are the results of his inquiry:

- Of the thirteen editors solicited, nine declined and four never responded.
- The nine editors who rejected the proposal offered markedly different rationales, including
  - the journal does not accept special issue proposals;
  - the topic does not align with the journal's focus;
  - skepticism that the topic warranted balanced debate;
- one editor who rejected the piece said the proposal sounded fascinating; and yet another offered encouragement, hopeful that he would find a publication outlet.

- Only one editor referred to the proposal as "morally repugnant" and "offensive" (para. 25); despite this editor's moral stance, the editor had supported the publication of Gilley's colonialism essay.

Rose-Redwood's genocide hoax thus tests the ethics of academic publishing—not through modes of deception that seek to publicly embarrass or shame figures engaged in suspect, harmful, or unethical activities. Rather, the hoax is an experiment carried out to produce feedback that may offer preliminary insights that would not be obtained otherwise. There is no direct harm to the journals or editors solicited through the hoax (no one is named or exposed) but their responses convey a strong sense of their editorial stance (Rose-Redwood, 2018).

This hoax is designed and executed to leverage deception as a feedback mechanism that illuminates the strengths or flaws embedded within a given realm or sphere of influence. In sum, the hoax offers a glimpse of what ethical forms of academic hoaxing might look like. Despite their lofty pronouncements surrounding the desire to see scholarship improved and rehabilitated on the academic left, both Sokal and Sokal Squared hoaxers ultimately devolve in tone to engage in hostile polemical argumentation.[11] At best, hoaxes of the kind perpetrated by Sokal and company can serve as a momentary critical check on academic complacency and as a reminder to strive for higher academic standards (Taylor, 2018). In the end, these hoaxes may not necessarily reflect a broader institutional crisis but rather prove to be "indispensable scandals" that are "part of a necessary process of reinvention" (Robin, 2004, p. 227). Imagine if the Sokal or Sokal Squared hoax essays were withdrawn prior to publication to signal lax editorial standards or peer-review oversight and to call attention to lack of academic rigour or research integrity. To design hoaxes with these intentions would produce valuable feedback, above and beyond what is available through the more conventional channels of peer review. It could also produce the conditions for less ideologically motivated attacks within academia, as well as less public forms of embarrassment and ridicule.

There is no shortage of controversies to address within academia, not least of which those that involve the production and circulation of knowledge. The need for reform is ever-present in a university system plagued with repeated instances of deception, dishonesty, misconduct, and malfeasance. This article has attempted to re-engage the topic of academic hoaxing in the interests of delimiting its shortcomings and possibilities as a mode of institutional critique. Through an exploration of the Sokal and Sokal Squared hoaxes, it has argued that academic hoaxing activities of this kind are best characterized as the performance of concern for the reform or rehabilitation of scholarly research in the interests of scoring political points within disciplinary factions and across mainstream news media. This larger performative work is also tied to the shoring up of legitimacy, credibility, and ultimately hegemony within the institution as a whole. As an ideological form of critique rooted in deception and manifest through the public shaming and embarrassment of various experts across disciplines, academic hoaxes have the capacity to polarize, divide, and even alienate members within a broader institutional community. Far from producing constructive outcomes, these interventions serve as flashpoints for stirring up discipline-based anxieties and

ideologically motivated attacks. Despite espousing the promise of serving the public interest, these modes of critique fall short of producing the desired result.

The above examples of academic misconduct raise the thornier question of whether deceptive interventions such as academic hoaxing can ever truly produce the conditions for constructive or generative feedback in academia. If academic hoaxing comes to be uniquely associated with destructive or unethical activities, we may risk losing yet another critical check on the forms of knowledge created both within and beyond the university. Contrary to what the above controversies have mostly shown, academic hoaxing may at times assist in producing more desirable outcomes. As Rose-Redwood's hoax attests, these forms of public deception can enlighten and instruct as to how to reform or re-envision areas of academia that are compromising the health and vitality of academic research. Ethical academic hoaxing may prove one possible way forward.

Notes

1. At times, the hoax/er is prematurely or unwillingly discovered and exposed, thereby inciting a public explanation or justification for the deception (see "Sokal Squared" discussion).

2. For an excellent synthesis of this critical project, see Ross (1996) on the political aims of science studies: "The political aims of [the constructionist academic left] are varied: a) some simply want to provide an accurate, scientific description of empirical scientific practice; b) others want, more ambitiously, to see science redeem its tarnished ideals from internal abuse and external impurities; c) others, more normative, would persuade scientists to be self-critical about the political nature of social origins of their research and to engage in advocacy science to combat the risks and injustices that are side effects of technoscientific development; d) still others want, more radically, to create new scientific methods that are rooted in the social needs of communities and accountable to social interests other than those of managerial elites in business, government, and the military" (p. 11).

3. As Sokal (2017) recently admitted, he first considered writing a more serious and direct critique of the abuses of postmodernism, but opted for parody because the former "would probably disappear into a black hole" (as cited in Ruark, 2017, para. 11). On the subject of parody, Sokal has been criticized for widely misrepresenting himself as a parodist. In reality, as Guillory (2002) writes, there are only a few moments when the article rises to parody; Sokal is most clearly engaged in paraphrasing, citing, and reproducing the canon of postmodern theory.

4. The hoaxers went so far as to take constructive reviewer comments from a rejected article and used them to indict both the field (sociology) and the journal (unnamed). The hoaxers would later use peer-reviewer comments selectively to highlight the lack of rigour in the targeted fields, despite the fact that the comments referred to articles that had been rejected (Schieber, 2018). Indeed, the hoaxers' claims to the lack of editorial or intellectual rigour are disingenuous, as the group was subjected to "three rounds of intensive revisions" and "careful editorial checking," a practice that "provided them with a roadmap for bringing their paper up to standards" (Yoder, 2018, para. 3).

5. For example, within two weeks of the hoax's outing, Harvard Medical School was calling for the retraction of 31 top-ranking cardiology publications based on fabricated research (Kolata, 2018).

6. For other examples of fake peer review, see Callaway, 2015; Ferguson et al., 2014.

7. To get an overall sense of which researchers and disciplines are particularly enmeshed in the web of scholarly retractions, see the Retraction Watch Leaderboard (2015).

8. The overall tenor of Bohannon's experiment was to test the integrity of OAJs. Although it would appear Bohannon's deception was designed to embarrass the open access journal system, he approached the project as a model of ethical intervention within a branch of academic publishing that has enor-

mous potential in serving the public interest. As University of Pennsylvania biologist David Roos attests in Bohannon's reveal essay in *Science*, "Everyone agrees that open access is a good thing. The question is how to achieve it" (as cited in Bohannon, 2013, p. 65).

9. See "Retract 'The case for colonialism.'"

10. See "Our colonial history and guilt over empire."

11. Three brief examples should suffice: for Sokal, postmodernism and cultural studies are merely examples of fashionable nonsense (Sokal & Bricmont, 1998); for Lindsay et al. (2018), scholars working in these fields "are like snake-oil salespeople who diagnose our society as being riddled with a disease only they can cure" (para. 23). In a now-deleted post to Twitter, Peter Boghossian openly expressed his hostility towards gender studies: "Gender Studies is primarily composed of radical ideologues who view indoctrination as their primary duty. These departments must be defunded" (as cited in Joshi, 2017, para. 15).

Websites
Google Scholar Citations, https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=new_profile&hl=en
Index Copernicus, https://indexcopernicus.com/index.php/en/
Retraction Watch, https://retractionwatch.com/
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