

Kennedy and *Science*

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HIGHLIGHT

As editor-in-chief of *Science* Donald Kennedy has enormous power in deciding what to publish and also undeniable responsibility for maintaining a high standard for the publications. However, under his watch, *Science* has not only repetitively published some flawed and even fraud papers but also becomes the world leader in issuing retractions. But has Kennedy done anything to fix these problems and break a bad trend?

ABSTRACT

Science is a top journal in the world. However, its reputation has been severely damaged by its repetitive publishing of flawed and even outright fraud papers. While its impact factor has remained high, its retraction rate has also reached the top in the world. However, *Science* appeared largely unaffected by these scandals and drawbacks. As the Editor-in-Chief of *Science*, Kenney so far has not published a single editorial specifically addressing the above problems in *Science*. The promised report on the internal and the “external” investigations on *Science*’s handling of the Hwang’s fraud papers so far have remained as a no show at all. Can *Science* remain as a trustable top journal if it does not correct its severe problems?

KEY WORDS

Scientific publishing, Scientific integrity, Misconduct, Retraction, Top journal, Editorial responsibility

Watching the largely involuntary and also the unbelievably slow response of *Science* to the Hwang stem cell research and publishing scandal, I submitted to *Science* a Commentary “Is Kennedy out of touch or else?” back in January. The submission was of course rejected by *Science* but was published anyway (*Sci. Ethics* 1:14-16, 2006). As the Hwang case developed further, I repeatedly submitted more relevant commentaries or letters to *Science*, prompting it to seriously look into its own problems in allowing not only Hwang’s but also some others’ obviously flawed and even outright fraud papers to be published in high profile. Of course, *Science* was very firm in rejecting these articles aimed at criticizing itself. *Science* would rather waste its so-called “very limited space” to publish junks than allow a small room for some truth that damages its authoritative image or jeopardizes its impact factor.

As a politician – former director of US Food and Drug Administration – Donald Kennedy seemed to know very well how to say and when to say to avoid being carried away by the storm and to even emerge as a victor in riding on the storm. In the hottest days of the Hwang stem cell research and publishing scandal, Kennedy basically maintained an unusually low profile, even stopped writing his regular editorials for a while. However, once the storm was largely over, he not only opened his mailbox but also picked up some old mails to glorify his decisions made years ago (*Science* 311: 1213, 2006). However, either he did not open the mailbox containing recent letters to him or he just played a seeing no evil and hearing no evil game, his mailbox showed no letter addressing the most recent and also the most spectacular publication scandal in the history – the Hwang research and publishing scandal. I am sure such letters do exist

in one of his mailbags because I had submitted several such letters (*Sci. Ethics* 1: 79-80, 2006).

While the whole world is focusing on misconduct in scientific research and publishing and many journals are now seriously looking into ways for improving manuscript reviewing and selection process, Kennedy so far has showed very limited interest in these activities. His publications on the Hwang scandal are just two short business-like letters: “Editorial Expression of Concern” (*Science* 311:36, 2006) and Editorial Retraction (*Science* 311: 335, 2006). Off the formal publication records he still strongly defended the obviously failed peer review system and even praised the poor expert advice that led to the high profile publication of some bad papers. As to the promised reports on the internal and the so-called “external” investigations on *Science*’s own problems, not a single line has been published on these reports despite months have been passed over the published deadline. Did Kennedy forget these promised reports or will he just try to cover up the results?

Kennedy is not a person shying of making criticism (to others) at all. However, it appeared that his main interest is still on politics rather than on science. To demonstrate this point, I have collected the titles of his editorials published so far in 2006 (Table 1). I should say that there is nothing wrong for him to write whatever he wishes to write. But, as the Editor-in-Chief of *Science*, he should at least balance his editorials so that at a minimum, one or two of them should be relevant to the primary mission of the journal – publishing good

research papers and maintaining a high standard of its publications.

With so many pages wasted in publishing flawed and fraud papers by *Science* and even more pages used in covering the news and stories on the scandals related with these bad papers, shouldn’t Kennedy feel obligated to write an editorial to address the most eminent and the true problem of his journal?

By the way, I have just found out that *Science* is the undisputable number one journal in the world in terms of publishing retractions. Among a total of 632 retraction notices contained in the PubMed, 38 were contributed by *Science* alone. It appears that *Science* actually was making significant increase of retractions decade by decade, from 5 in the 1980s to 11 in the 1990s and to 22 in the first 6 years of 2000s. This decade doubling in retractions showed how bad a job that *Science* has done in making its selection of manuscript for publication. I should point out that, since *Science* sometimes retracted its papers in batch with publication of a single editorial, the real number of papers being retracted by *Science* should be higher than the number of retraction notices recorded in the PubMed.

Since Kennedy started his job in *Science* in 2000 *Science* has published too many bad papers. If Kennedy can still remember its massive retraction of Schön’s papers in 2002 (8 papers in one editorial retraction) and if he still have a fresh memory on the retraction of the two landmark papers by Hwang, he should feel some urge to do something to fix the problem of his journal?

Public is waiting for his action!

Table 1. Kennedy’s Editorials published so far in 2006

Date	Title	Vol:page	Co-author
20060106	New year, new look, old problem	311:15	None
20060113	Good news – and bad	311:145	None
20030303	The mailbag	311:1213	None
20060310	Summers and Harvard	311:1345	None
20060324	Ice and history	311:1673	Brook Hanson
20060407	FDA centennial	312:19	None
20060414	Nick Cozzarelli	312:159	None
20060512	More silliness on the hill	312:813	None
20060526	Health roundup	312:1105	None
20060616	A welcome new look	312:1573	None