

‘Smear Campaign’...

..., is how *Nature* recently labelled a very special (and very aggressive) effort to expose accusations of scientific fraud. Since last July, one or more anonymous authors have constantly been bombarding individual scientists and science journalists with emails and internet publications, proclaiming that data has been faked on a grand scale in the publications by the Italian immunologist Silvia Bulfone-Paus at the Research Center Borstel in Germany.

Lab Times and its “German sister” *Laborjournal* have also been pawns in this “smear campaign” right from the start. Firstly, “our” emails came from an English email address using the pseudonym “Marco Berns”, later the sender(s) changed to “David Hardman”. (Another US magazine, *The Scientist*, received the same kind of accusatory emails from a “Fernando Pessoa”). In addition, those emails were accompanied by online postings on a website hosted in Panama and operated by a certain “Martin Frost”.

Here is one example from a “Marco Berns” email:

“A recurring theme is to confuse the reader with so much *in vitro* ‘data’, and then put in things, which are artificial. Their favourite trick is to do an immunoprecipitation and then run western blots and using either different exposures of the same image to claim something different, or to simply cut an image from one place and paste it somewhere else, or splice things together to make a point, when in fact those things were quite separate.”

Sometimes, however, the tone was harsher – as in the following more recent example from “Martin Frost”:

“To date, no papers have actually been retracted. They still stand as exemplars to the young as to how to build a career. Get the position first – damn the Science – and once there, get people to have the ideas and do the ‘donkey work’, while one spends all one’s time in the rarefied atmosphere of the ‘club’ who hands out the money. Obsequiousness and conformism is what matters not scientific acumen. But what of all those wonderful scientists who were not given the opportunities that were given to Bulfone-Paus? What fine jobs they could have done with the (European) tax-payer funded resources and security of tenure given to her.”

Well, you can imagine that we immediately found ourselves asking: What can be done in this case, as a journal?

First of all, there is an unwritten rule in journalism not to write about people (or their information) if you aren’t able to talk to them yourself. A more important rule states: keep the identity of your informant secret, if demanded. Nevertheless – surprise, surprise – we were not able to talk to “Marco Berns”, “David

Hardman” *et al.* Our email requests to answer a couple of questions on the matter by phone were denied. Not exactly the best way to earn the trust of your selected journalist.

Speaking of rules; at the same time, we had more than mixed feelings about the whole “procedure”. Should we really permit some anonymous (some would even say “gutless”) witch hunters to exploit us and our journals for the purpose of a campaign that runs far outside a framework that has rules and rights? Or, more generally, is it okay to anonymously publish accusations about whomever one wants, rather than to have a proper investigation with rules and rights? Of course not!

But ignore it completely? No, the topic was clearly too “hot”. Thus, we decided to start our own investigation, trying to talk directly to the people involved and get first-hand information. Just good, honest journalism.

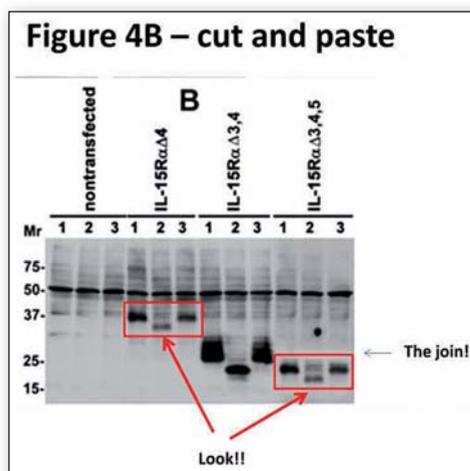
(Fortunately, an official commission had meanwhile started investigating the case and has recently come to the conclusion that, indeed, a whole load of data had been manipulated in the Bulfone-Paus lab. For this reason, the commission has just asked the respective journals to retract a total of twelve publications. Silvia Bulfone-Paus has since, more or less voluntarily, suspended her directorship at the Research Center Borstel. More details will be published in one of our next *Laborjournal* issues.)

Sounds good, doesn’t it? And, moreover, so politically correct! However, there was one big problem: the pure evidence for data manipulation in the mails and postings was worked up and presented in an awfully good way! So good, in fact, that the author of an Internet comment even suggested it as an “excellent example, which should be studied in detail by all scientists (particularly by students, editors and reviewers) to learn how to identify manipulations of scientific data”. Simply refer to the example above.

And finally, we also cannot deny: it was *this* clear evidence that convinced us of the severity of the matter. It was *this* evidence that put us on track to search for the truth ourselves. And it was *this* evidence that provided us with the necessary ammunition to ask the right questions. Irrespective of whether it was presented in a “correct” way or not.

Ultimately, we have been left to question whether the “Bulfone-Paus stone” would have actually started rolling without that “smear campaign”. To be honest, we doubt it.

At the very end of the day, it’s the truth that counts – not the modalities.



An example for presumed data duplication in a Bulfone-Paus paper (from: <http://www.martinfrost.ws>)

