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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

To Publish or Not to Publish PhD Parts Before its Completion is Also an Ethical Question

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1. Introduction

Publishing parts of PhD research results before actual public defence and final thesis submission becomes more and more common in exact sciences and sometimes it is even considered a prerequisite for successful PhD completion, although this practice has been met with scepticism by part of the scientific community. Here all arguments will be epigrammatically presented, but also ethical aspects of the “*to publish or not to publish*” question that have not been mentioned before will be pointed out. These will not take into consideration PhD results whose publication is deemed urgent by society, nor results that are independent from the PhD theme.

2. To publish

1. Project idea and student gain visibility and recognisability.
2. *Scripta manent*: PhD theme becomes “copy-righted” and student its owner, at least until PhD completion.
3. PhD public defence is facilitated: inserting proof of publication into the presentation offers artificial solidity and importance to the latter's content.
4. PhD is an academic career prerequisite: publishing is a nice training for later.
5. Articles may have many co-authors, promoting collaboration which is useful in one's academic, and not only, career.

3. Not to publish

1. Project is fragmented, endangering the cohesion of the whole.
2. Publishing could become the main PhD student's goal and not a reward, taking too much time that should be devoted elsewhere (finishing faster and/or better).
3. Trying to publish is a tiring procedure, without helping reduce the doubtless PhD public defence stress.
4. Students tend to publish as soon as possible, risking content's quality, and at journals that might not be a perfect match.
5. Copy-right issue: whom do research findings belong to, university or student? Does the student need official university's agreement to publish?

4. Ethical issues

One of the main requirements for PhD themes is originality and uniqueness. But when parts of the research results are published before actual completion, isn't originality sacrificed to publication? When dissertation will include the already published article(s), if students reference to them, they indirectly admit having violated originality, and if they do not do so, it is pure plagiarism. This is simultaneously an ethical and legal issue, since PhD's originality is examined independently at least twice, during theme proposal and when dissertation is submitted and publicly defended. Additionally, student and university are bound by contract, which

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theoretically also predicts possible copy-right issues of research results, yet it is the exact same contract that obliges the student to publish before PhD completion, thus creating originality conflicts, although this may seem to be technically lifted off by the presence of the professor as co-author, simultaneously acting as representative of the university.

One of the main requirements of scientific journals is that the research work presented has not been published elsewhere. PhD dissertations are *sine qua non* published by the university's publication service. Publishing with two different publishers partly the same content is unethical and possibly illegal, especially when rare are the occasions that at least one of them is aware of this. Unless, of course, PhD content is not considered as research, while the article is, which is illogical and, again, unethical, at least towards the Faculty and supervising professor who entrusted the student with their idea, and goes against the first requirement for a PhD theme.

On the contrary, postponing research results publication or not publishing them at all is purely against ethics. This is not only true towards the scientific community, since sharing results, research and scientific opinions via publishing is one of the core ethics of sciences, but also against the body or institution that finances and employs the researcher. Why should it be different during PhD? When results are ground-breaking, publishing as soon as possible is highly encouraged and this is also part of any university's core missions - it is usually considered more ethical to communicate important issues fast, even if this might violate originality. But even when research results are not expected to have a paramount effect on society, they may still need be published before PhD completion, mainly for two reasons:

- saving time from anyone attempting something similar and
- students tend to feel too tired once finished and just want closure - results risk, thus, never being published elsewhere than the university's press.

5. Discussion

Impression is that exact sciences promote publishing parts of PhD before completion, while theoretical ones the opposite. Tendency is to forget what PhD stands for, maybe because “Doctor” is used in exact sciences, while “Philosophy” in theoretical. But when more and more universities consider it a prerequisite to publish before, we may wish to bring exact and theoretical scientists, possibly unaware of the contrasting opinions of the other, together, so that an ethical answer to the “*to publish or not*” question is finally given. PhDs have many things in common, regardless of primary science field or geographical base: duration, thesis dissertation, public defence, a supervising professor, etc... Why must we exclude without further thinking that they also have common publication rules?

Further reading

Nature Human Behaviours's special issue of October 2019 ([link](#)), Frick and Mason on “Theses by Publication: A comparative analysis of university policies in two countries”, 2022 ([link](#)), etc...

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