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# Literature and Insights Editorial

Editorial

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## Honestly?

I am not telling you anything new in saying that we live in an era where the veracity of news items is increasingly questioned. This is also not the first time in history, of course, when ostensibly true information is actually the result of massaging or completely skewing data to advantage one cause or another; one person or another. You can call it propaganda if you like. How does this element of doubt affect you, personally and professionally?

The idea of a respectable culture of honesty and transparency is under enormous pressure. The term “fake news” is bandied about, particularly in the US, as a knee-jerk slogan to shut down debate rather than to stimulate enquiry and discussion that is both informed and respectful (i.e. to argue rather than simply quarrel or bluster). Fact checking is more necessary than ever, and maybe that is why it is under more threat through direct attack or de-funding of investigative journalism.

It seems there are areas where we will not look, or will not look hard enough. Where should we start? Owning up, with verifiable data, to the real trends in coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in certain jurisdictions? Stop treating rates of incarceration as merely numbers rather than a cause for review of social attitudes and justice systems. Information is nothing if you do not act on it, and it is worth even less if it is not made available. Let us look at a couple of topics that say something about human character, and in the main I will keep to an area that you are quite likely to have some experience with – education.

Recent events stand out in the academic landscape that involve attempts to exploit system weaknesses. There are plenty of articles on aspects of admission to US universities (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/admissions>), some of which necessarily address issues of equity. In the main, the idea of truth and honesty is at the heart of these. A specific strand that caught my attention concerns the perversion of qualifying criteria for entry, and donations that could be seen as bribes (unless they were actually outright bribes, anyway).

The involvement of wealthy parents in securing their children’s access to well-regarded institutions has been a prominent facet of admissions to universities in the US. Part of the public interest is due to curiosity about the lives of particular well-known figures but, regardless of such profiles, there is also the question of privilege.

In 2019, there was a string of revelations about payments made by parents to get children into Yale, Stanford and Harvard. This was actually not “new” news since there have been occasionally reported cases going back some 25 years. Next in the spotlight during 2019 was the University of Southern California, which, it was claimed, had “more applicants and parents involved than any other institution” (Jaschik 2020, online).

Many of the parents in the admissions scandal have pleaded guilty. They have admitted to bribing coaches to get their children in through the services of Rick Singer, the admitted mastermind of the scandal.

The brief [lawyers’ statement] notes that a spreadsheet for admissions officials included their donor status, and that this was especially true for athletes. (Jaschik 2020, online).

Singer encouraged this “side-door” approach and siphoned off some of those funds.

Was this a level playing field (no pun intended)? Emphatically, no. An honest and transparent process? No, again. It seems that, at least in some cases, the universities accepted



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or even condoned the notion that payments disguised as philanthropy should not be questioned. That is not just a failure of policy but a breach of faith. It tells us that the ethics of some university administrations stink.

The overall situation begs such questions as: “Where were the effective controls? Where was the scrutiny?” Ryan Craig points to this very gap in his article, “The Admissions Scandal: A Job for Internal Audit” ([Craig 2019](#), online). How about this?

Terah Brown, executive director of the Association of College and University Auditors, representing the internal audit function at 500 colleges and universities, was not aware of any university report or statement indicating that thorough audits of the admissions function are typical or have ever occurred. According to Brown, “the board sets the path for audit review.” ([Craig 2019](#), online)

Back-door payments might get you in trouble, but side-door ones, aka donations, might not. And internal auditors turned a blind eye? A scouring light should be shone on the accountability not just of the educational bodies but also of their internal audit systems. I hope that none of you have reason to shift uncomfortably in your seats at this point.

You could also ask who was doing the exploiting in these cases; the parents or the coaches, or were they exploiting each other? Both sides benefitted and were playing the system. Any talk of exploitation in simple terms risks overlooking other parties: perhaps teaching staff members who had no insight into the practice (or did not question it) and ended up with students who would not have met the standard criteria; and, students who missed a place because they did not have rich parents. Regarding the latter, it is worth looking at Rick Dalton’s 2019 article, referenced below ([Dalton 2019](#), online) in which he advocates a focus on creating opportunities for disadvantaged students instead of getting angry. I would be doing both.

Just after this, came news of another trick:

The scam, apparently devised by independent college consultant Lora Georgieva,

owner of Destination College in Lincolnshire, Ill., involved parents giving up

legal guardianship of their children during the junior or senior year of high

school to a friend or family member. That allowed the student to claim

independent status, meaning that eligibility for financial aid was based only

on the student’s earnings rather than the parents’ income and assets. ([Jump 2019](#), online)

Yes, parents gave up legal guardianship. It was intended to make the children eligible for financial aid at college. The weakness, if you can call it that, was there waiting to be used. Were the parents poor and deserving? According to this article, they were not.

There is also the scandal (as I write) about registered pilots in Pakistan. Almost a third were found to have had other people sit exams in their place, and they have now been barred from flying. As a result, the EU will not let Pakistan planes into member countries for at least six months.

An inquiry into a 22 May Airbus A320 crash that killed 97 people at the southern port city of Karachi resulted in the revelation that 260 of 860 pilots in Pakistan had cheated during their exams... ([Associated Press 2020](#), online)

...spokesperson Abdullah Khan said, adding that some of the fake pilots also fly for foreign carriers. ([Saifi and Gan 2020](#), online)

I was going to proceed to details of other examples of cheating, such as plagiarising (think paper mills for a start). That is something I have had to deal with in my own university teaching, and as a member of a university committee dealing with practices around student integrity. That topic is worth an editorial on its own, I think.

These situations all speak of forms of corruption and a failure of controls. I hope that we can all feel that we are a force for good in our careers and elsewhere, countering such attitudes.

Now speaking of data, I briefly alluded to COVID-19 before and Chandana Alawattage has here taken it head-on in his poem, questioning it as a subject where the enormity of the event is reduced to data and graphs. It is a sobering angle that we have all had to face for months and which is treated effectively at a personal level in his writing, reminding us of the human face of the disaster.

The need for something lighter is answered with Garry Carnegie's satirical article, produced during lockdown in the Australian state of Victoria. It is, therefore, related to COVID-19 as well, although less directly. At the same time, it connects with the theme of honesty in this editorial since it obliquely raises questions of whether we divulge the true situation concerning Santa (aka Father Christmas – see, there is already some blurring). It would not be an *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal (AAAJ)* piece if it did not have a scent of business about it too.

I am not sure about saying "Merry Christmas!" these days. I think political correctness would allow me to wish you all "compliments of the season" and very happy new year, and I exactly do that.

Your own creative contributions can be submitted via ScholarOne (see below), and your email correspondence is always welcome, of course, at: [steve.evans@flinders.edu.au](mailto:steve.evans@flinders.edu.au).

### Literary editor

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Steve Evans

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