A personal take on science and society

# World view

By Theresa Jean
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## Publishers: let transgender scholars correct their names

**Prohibiting changes to author names on published works can harm vulnerable people.**

> **"In changing my name, I was faced with what felt like an impossible choice."**

Last July, I changed my name. My old name was a reminder of a mistake made when I was a baby. As a transgender woman who transitioned in my 40s, I now have 20 years of professional accomplishments as a designer and scholar of human–computer interactions to sort through as I navigate my identity. In changing my name, I was faced with what felt like an impossible choice: to abandon past work, or accept that I would never escape an identity that for decades had felt like a prison.

I opted for a third path: to correct the record. And so I reached out to my publishers (15 legal entities, collectively responsible for 83 publications, including 15 through Springer Nature, which also publishes this journal). I requested that my name be updated in their digital archives. All preferred to maintain the status quo.

In June, the US Supreme Court ruled that gay, lesbian and transgender people were protected from discrimination by employers. That is a welcome change — but there is much more to do to promote inclusivity. More than a year on from my initial requests, publishers have still not granted me the name change.

Why is this such a crucial issue for me and other trans scholars? Many of us refer to our previous name as a 'dead-name' to highlight the distress that it can provoke. Every time I encounter my deadname it causes trauma, and I am not alone in feeling this way. Deadnaming and misgendering are often used deliberately as transphobic attacks.

Why should cis scholars care? For one thing, people are most creative and productive when they can be their true selves. For another, the issue also affects any person who changes their name on marriage or to avoid an abuser, stalker or harasser. Third, two names associated with one corpus is surely bad for bibliometrics. And, of course, most people want to safeguard the rights and safety of others.

Public connections between my name and my deadname put me in the way of other, more concrete harms. Fifteen countries criminalize the gender identity or expression of trans people — a crime that in some cases carries the death penalty. And until the Supreme Court ruling, at least 20 US states did not protect transgender individuals against employment discrimination. Even when the law protects us, de facto discrimination remains real.

When it became clear that changing my name on my publications was not going to be a simple request, I dug into publishers' policies. I started with those of the Association of Computing Machinery (ACM) Digital Library. It is the largest scholarly repository of computing, encompassing

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more than 2.8 million works stretching back to 1936, and is where most of my publications reside. I was brought into a conversation inside the ACM, involving a trans colleague who had been negotiating with the publications board for more than a year. The board, to its credit, established a working group to draft an inclusive name-change policy; the group included board members, myself and three other trans scholars.

But the board's initial position, that name changes could be applied only to metadata (and not PDF files), was a non-starter. This would juxtapose a trans author's correct name with their previous name, cause confusion about how to cite the work and disclose to any casual reader that the author is transgender. If my deadname remains associated with my scholarship, readers of my work could either misname and misgender me, or apply anti-trans bias to my work before even encountering my ideas.

Many objections to trans people asking to be named correctly are based in the insinuation that the request is a form of deceit or fraud, when in fact it is the opposite. Much of the ACM's hesitancy comes from a deep sense of obligation to the 'historical record' and caution over when it is appropriate to change archives. Over many long discussions, the working group faced and allayed concerns about findability and rights of co-authors. Eventually, it became clear that the only area in which the board was philosophically opposed was to do with a paper being invoked in a legal proceeding: the ACM could then be subpoenaed to verify that the paper had not been altered. The other concerns were about implementation. Could changing names alter pagination? Could names be changed on image-based files for papers that pre-dated digital publishing? How should pronouns be handled in papers with changed names?

After 16 months of negotiation, a compromise is near. The plan is for the ACM to update all publicly accessible digital materials related to an author whose name has been changed. The previous version would be retained in a separate repository, accessible only when a subpoena is served. The draft policy was circulated, vetted by lawyers and voted through late last year. It's imperfect: it doesn't update citations by other scholars and, of course, print documents cannot be changed. But when implemented, it will be, to my knowledge, a first in the publishing world: a trans-inclusive approach to retroactively changing author names on public records.

These changes will not completely solve the problem of being deadnamed, outed and misgendered. However, it could make the often traumatic, frustrating and dehumanizing process of transitioning less fraught. That will allow people like me to spend more time doing the scholarship that we're trained to do, and less time fighting to be called by our names.

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