

Letter from the Editor

Truth is stranger than fiction and blessings in disguise

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This letter is inspired by three different cases currently under review at *TCJ*, but I have encountered these same issues with cases I reviewed for other journals or case workshops. It is an issue that has important implications in the perception of case research as legitimate scholarly/intellectual contributions. What is the difference between a “fictionalized” case and a “disguised” case? Is a case release necessary when a case is “disguised?”

What is the difference between fictionalized and disguised cases?

Let's begin by defining the key terms:

- Case: “A factual description of events that happened at some point in the past (Naumes and Naumes, 2012a).” Vega (2017) defines a case by listing the following keywords “story, factual, past, decision, and analysis.” Cases are factual stories based on actions that happened in the past. The reader is expected to make a decision or recommendation or to perform an analysis or evaluative description of the action. For these two sources and many of the professional case research and writing organizations, fictionalized cases are not really “cases” at all.
- Fictionalized “case”: these are stories that may be based on or inspired by actual situations. Generally, the authors have taken liberties with the factual situation to make the story more compelling or engaging for students. Sometimes fictionalized “cases” simplify the situation by creating composite characters or an impartial observer that can narrate the events and provide insightful commentary to move the story along. Writers may also simplify the financial/quantitative aspects of the situation so that students can easily do the necessary computations to arrive at a correct answer. Experience suggests that the students often rebel at the use of this type of work and do not devote as much time and thought into their preparation of these stories for class discussion. They will say the “situation doesn't ring true.”
- Disguised case: this type of case is based on a factual situation, but the authors have changed the names of the people in the case, the name of the firm, the firm's location and in rare situations, changed even the industry. The extent of the disguise must be disclosed in a footnote in the opening of the case itself and in the research methodology in the instructor's manual. Disguise is often used when the case focuses on sensitive issues that make it impossible to obtain a signed release to publish without the disguise. To be clear, disguised cases must be accompanied by a signed release if the case uses internal information to protect sources from criticism and liability if the disguise should be penetrated.

Does *TCJ* publish fictionalized “cases”?

The editorial policy of *TCJ* clearly states that *TCJ* “publishes **factual** teaching cases spanning the full spectrum of business” (emphasis added) (The CASE Association, n.d.). On the Emerald Group Publishing website, the journal's policy states that “cases **must be factual**, and releases must be available where necessary” (emphasis added) (Emerald Group Publishing, n.d.). We do not publish fictionalized cases. If the editor suspects that a submission is fictionalized, she often confers with the authors to clarify the situation and/or desk rejects the manuscript as soon as its fictional basis is determined.

Why not fictionalized “cases”?

Proponents of fictionalized “cases” often argue that the literary license used to create their “cases” make the stories more engaging for students, simplify complex situations or are necessary to permit



development of stories surrounding controversial or embarrassing situations. I am currently teaching a leadership course that uses fictionalized “cases” at the end of each chapter to illustrate course topics in a “real world” situation. Classroom discussion of these “cases” does not compare to the discussion generated by a case based on a factual situation. Students quickly discover that the textbook cases are written to conform to the chapter coverage – a chapter describing two styles of leadership has a “case” with two leaders that (aha!) can be classified as representing one or the other leadership style. The roles have been written to make it easy for students to make this classification and that it is typically where the discussion ends. According to the students, the case situations and the solutions are too simplistic, too “textbook” to represent what really happens in the world.

The primary reason most case journals and case research professional organizations (such as NACRA and all of its affiliates and The CASE Association) insist on factual cases is that we are trying to position case research and writing as a legitimate scholarly/intellectual contribution worthy of consideration as research. Factual cases may be based on primary research (interviews with key participants in the organization, participant observation, review of primary materials such as legal proceedings or internal company documents) supplemented by appropriate secondary research (journalistic accounts). Naumes and Naumes (2012b) point out that “there is no form of research where we invent or mask material such that it does not match what actually happened” (p. 10). Thus, if our work is to be considered as a legitimate scholarly/intellectual contribution it “must not” be fictionalized.

The 2017 accreditation guidelines developed by AACSB International (n.d.), defines intellectual contributions as “original works intended to advance the theory, practice, and/or teaching of business and management. They are scholarly in the sense that they are based on generally accepted research principles, are validated by peers and disseminated to appropriate audiences.” We can turn to the US National Science Foundation (NSF) for “generally accepted research principles.” NSF defines three types of research misconduct, two of which are relevant to this discussion – fabrication and falsification. Fabrication is defined as “making up results and recording or reporting them,” while falsification is “manipulating research materials, [...] or changing or omitting data or results such that the research is not accurately represented in the research record” (Fischer, n.d.). For NSF and AACSB, fictionalizing situations and/or creating composite characters in developing a case would violate research standards. Fictionalized “cases” are thus not acceptable intellectual contributions.

What are the rules for disguised cases?

TCJ and many other case journals do publish disguised cases. As defined above, disguise is often used if the case situation is too sensitive or to avoid subjecting case characters from embarrassment or criticism. For these reasons, disguise is often used when the case author is the protagonist in the case. It is permissible to disguise the names of persons, the name of the organization involved, the geographic area and the financials, however, it is important that actions of the people and the essential issues stay as close to the real situation as possible (Seeger and Rock, 2012). If insider information is used in developing the case, a signed release is still necessary for publication (Rock, 2012). Because disguised cases are based on observations of a real situation, they meet the generally accepted standards for factual cases and are considered legitimate intellectual contributions.

Principles to live by as a case writer

Journalist Roy Peter Clark provides two cornerstone principles of journalism that apply equally to case writing:

Do not add. This means that writers of nonfiction should not add to a report things that did not happen. To make news clear and comprehensible, it is often necessary to subtract or condense. Done without care or responsibility, even such subtraction can distort. We cross a more definite line into fiction, however, when we invent or add facts, or images, or sounds that were not there (Clark, 2002).

Do not deceive. This means that journalists should never mislead the public in reproducing events. The implied contract of all nonfiction is binding: The way it is represented here is, to the best of our knowledge, the way it happened (Clark, 2002) (emphasis in the original).

In this issue

- Corporate governance: a farce at Volkswagen? (Jaskiran Arora). This case is set in September of 2015. The precipitating events, which started with the emissions scandal and tampering of the technology, unfold a history of threatening organizational culture, deliberate cheating, and failure of good governance. Given the roles and responsibilities of Board of Management and the Supervisory Board, how could the scandal of such magnitude go unnoticed? Were robust corporate governance practices not being followed at VW? (undergraduate, graduate or executive level corporate governance or ethics).
- Faeyee: allocation of constrained business resources for production of competitive products from cost accounting perspectives (Ji Li and Di Wu). Faeyee Electronics was an electronics company that manufactured and sold smartphones including XS and XT types. The management of Faeyee wanted to pursue the maximum contribution margin as much as possible, especially since they were faced with limited resources. It was necessary to apply analytical tools and cost accounting concepts to study this case including cost-volume-profit analysis, learning curve analysis, regression analysis, definitions of competitive products, constrained nonlinear optimization, and contribution margin (undergraduate or graduate managerial accounting).
- Wanda's ambitious expansion in the global movie industry (Jae Jung and Devon Howe). The Wanda case offers an overview of Wanda Group's transition from a real-estate firm in China to a global leader in the movie industry. Wanda Group, a Chinese conglomerate headquartered in Beijing, caused a major commotion in the US movie industry when it acquired AMC Entertainment in 2012. The AMC acquisition was the largest acquisition by a Chinese firm in the USA up to that time, costing \$2.6 billion. Following that, a series of acquisitions had made Wanda Group the largest movie theater company, respectively in the USA, Europe, and the world by the end of 2016. The case focuses on Wanda Group's global expansion efforts through major acquisitions in the USA and Europe, and the challenges that Wanda Group faced. (International Business and Strategy).
- Passion or profit: Bloody Creek Vineyard (Daphne Rixon and Karen Lightstone). Edward Rowan, 89 year-old patriarch and the Rowan family were trying to decide if they should start a vineyard in the Nova Scotia Annapolis Valley. Edward had a life-long dream of starting a vineyard on this five-acre farm. Edward, his son David and granddaughter Mary along with their respective spouses had agreed to be partners and provide financing to start the vineyard. The time had arrived to make a decision because they had to order the vines by the end of the month. While they have an extended family to provide free labor for planting, pruning and harvesting along with free access to the necessary machinery, they wanted to be sure that they did not lose money on the venture. They recognized the first four to five years would not generate profits, but they wanted to ensure that in the long-term the venture would be viable. (undergraduate and graduate managerial accounting or entrepreneurship).
- House of Bounce (Tod Cox and Ram Subramanian). Tom Feldman took a buyout from a large technology company and used part of the money to enroll in the MBA program of a reputed university in the metropolitan Houston, Texas area. While in the MBA program, Tom began evaluating potential businesses with the objective of identifying one that would suit his needs. As part of a MBA course in marketing, Tom put together a student team to conduct marketing research on an opportunity to open a party center in Houston. After his team completed the study, Tom had both financial and marketing data to make a decision about the launch (undergraduate and graduate marketing).

References

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