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Serious assault on research freedom

The Israeli company Nemesysco's success in securing, under threat of a lawsuit, the withdrawal of an article that was critical of its products has recently created a major stir. 'Charlatanry in forensic speech science: A problem to be taken seriously', by two Swedish researchers and professors of phonetics, Anders Eriksson (University of Gothenburg) and Francisco Lacerda (Stockholm University), was published in the *International Journal of Speech, Language and the Law* (14.169–193) in December 2007.

The article criticised the systems that have been developed for voice analysis, by identifying emotional stress in acoustic speech signals, for the purpose of detecting whether the speaker is lying. Above all the article was about Layered Voice Analysis, a system developed by Nemesysco that is used by, for example, 25 UK local authorities to detect fraudulent social-security applicants. In the view of Professors Eriksson and Lacerda, Nemesysco's system is incapable of detecting when speakers are lying and provides no information whatsoever concerning their mental state.

Through its lawyers Nemesysco approached Equinox, the publisher of the journal, with a threat to sue unless, first, the article was withdrawn and secondly, in a conspicuous location in a future issue of the journal, the editor apologised for publishing it and for the fact that Nemesysco had not been given the opportunity to comment on the article prior to its publication. Equinox agreed to remove the web version of the article (the printed journal had already been distributed) and published an announcement on its website including the statement that the company should have been contacted before publication. Moreover, in a letter to the authors, the publisher informed them that Nemesysco intended to sue them for slander if they published the article or any similar material elsewhere.

The matter has been raised in news media, as well as *Science* and *Nature*, both in Sweden and in other countries.

The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences regards what has happened as a serious matter. Incidents of this kind are a threat to research freedom and, by extension, to the free dissemination of information in society. Threats to sue must not be used to restrict scientific discussion.