Retractions: A publisher’s perspective

Daily realities & future challenges

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Earning trust through transparency

Unethical research undermines trust in the author, their institute, the journal, a field of research, academic publishing & in science itself.

By correcting the scholarly record responsibly & transparently, we hope to nurture trust in science.
Context
The Elsevier context

- We publish 2500 journals, 600 of which are society-owned
- We publish 500,000 new papers per year
- ScienceDirect contains 16 million articles/chapters, dating back to 1826
- 5,000 Editors in Chief work closely with:
  - 200 Journal Managers (production editors)
  - 150 Publishers
Our goal: fair, clear, accurate, timely, accessible retractions
Oops: Elsevier journal retracts the wrong paper

When Saidur Rahman learned last month that his 2010 review paper about nanoparticles in refrigeration systems had been retracted, he was concerned—no one at the journal had told him it was going to be pulled.

Rahman, a professor of engineering at Sunway University in Selangor, Malaysia, had recently corrected his 2010 re-

What took more than five years? Elsevier retracts 20 papers by world’s most prolific fraudster

Author wins judgment against Elsevier in lawsuit over retraction

UPDATED: Elsevier retracts a paper on solar cells that appears to plagiarize a Nature journal. But the reason is...odd.
Main mechanisms for correcting the record

- **Corrigendum**: for honest mistakes, author in agreement
- **Expression of Concern**: ideally temporary, when evidence is inconclusive
- **Withdrawal**: articles in press; final articles where error was by Elsevier
- **Retraction**: 200 per year, serious ethical infringements or serious honest error
- **Removal**: very rare (8 per year): risk to public health; privacy violation; very serious legal issue
- **Replacement**: extremely rare (1-2 per year). As removal but paper still makes sense without the removed information, e.g. blacked out photo.

http://www.elsevier.com/editors/policies/article-withdrawal
# Elsevier retractions per year

Improvement in speed of implementation of retractions
Reason for retraction (n=1610)

- Author-reported scientific error: 33%
- Image manipulation/duplication: 23%
- Serious errors: 6%
- Authorship issue: 5%
- Peer-review manipulation: 7%
- Duplication: 21%
- Plagiarism: 5%
Daily realities
Elsevier’s retraction panel: ensuring retractions are *fair*, clear & accurate

- Established by Mark Seeley in 2005
- Panel checks all retractions before they are implemented
- Confirms that COPE & Elsevier best practices have been followed
- Respects editorial independence, plays advisory role: the Editor always has the final say on the wording
This article has been retracted at the request of the Editor-in-Chief.

The authors have plagiarized part of a paper that had already appeared in [give Abbreviated title, volume (year) first page - last page. DOI]. One of the conditions of submission of a publication is that authors declare explicitly that their work is original and has not appeared in any other publication elsewhere. Re-use of any data should be appropriately cited. As such this article represents a severe abuse of the scientific publishing system. The scientific community takes a strong view on this matter and apologies are offered to readers of the journal that this was not detected during the submission process.

This article has been retracted at the request of the Editor-in-Chief.

After a thorough investigation, the Editor has concluded that the acceptance of this article was partly based upon the positive advice of at least one illegitimate reviewer report. The report was submitted from an email account which was provided to the journal as a suggested reviewer of the submission of the article. Although purportedly a real reviewer account, the Editor has concluded that this was not of an appropriate, independent reviewer.

This manipulation of the peer-review process represents a clear violation of the fundamentals of peer review, our publishing policies, and publishing ethics standards. Apologies are offered to the reviewer whose identity was assumed and to the readers of the journal that this deception was not detected during the submission process.
Encouraging best practice

• Have all authors have been correctly notified & sent a copy of the notice?
• Is the notice informative enough?
• Is the notice accurate? e.g. duplication confused with plagiarism
• Does it include links to available supporting documents: e.g. previous articles that were copied from; official report by investigating committee
• Can any claims be independently verified? e.g. that one author was solely responsible for misconduct
• Other considerations:
  • what if someone is being scapegoated?
  • what else are we **not** being told?
  • is it libellous? Must be factual or honest editor opinion based on fact
  • the potential human fallout from every case
Future challenges
Future challenges

• Finally lose the last vestiges of the print era, e.g. anachronistic concept of article in press
• Preventing unknowing citation of retracted papers
• Further differentiate types of retractions?
• Do we need a retraction mechanism for citations?
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