

03-Jun-2022

Unidentified retracted articles on publishers' websites, bibliographic databases, academic social networks, and the Sci-Hub black open access website: a problem that should no longer be ignored
BMJ-2022-071385

Dear Dr. Boudry,

Many thanks for sending us your article and giving us the chance to consider your work. We sent your paper out for external peer review and discussed it at a recent Analysis committee meeting (present: Dr Jennifer Rasanathan, Dr Juan Franco, Dr Rachael Hinton, Dr Huseyin Naci, Dr Alison Tonks and myself).

This paper covers an important topic that would be of interest to our readers, and we are interested in publishing on this topic. However, as it is currently written, this paper does not meet the aims of the Analysis section.

Based on comments from the editorial committee and peer reviewers, we believe this manuscript requires substantial revision - if not a total rewrite - for further consideration as a BMJ Analysis paper. If you are willing to undertake this scale of revision in line with our comments, we would welcome a new submission from you on the same topic.

The reviewers' reports are available at the end of this letter. The editors comments are listed below:

An Analysis paper is deceptively hard to write: it is neither a narrative review or an editorial, but a persuasive paper that draws on evidence to convince the reader of a particular view on an issue where there is some debate (also noting - and/or refuting! - evidence that exists to support alternate or opposing views).

Papers build toward a central thesis, providing evidence to clearly explain why readers should agree with you rather than counter-views or alternatives.

1. The analysis of citations could be more robust. Some concrete examples can help. You mention a paper published in Cell in 2010, which was later retracted, but still appeared to be cited several years later. Do we know if these citations are not simply to say that this article was retracted? An analysis of whether citations were because they were retracted, beyond case reports would be helpful.
2. A better description of RWDB, how exhaustive is its breadth?
3. The conclusion and solutions should be clear and concise to send the reader away satisfied and educated.
4. The mini study is difficult to follow, especially the methods, particularly the contribution of references. The argument rests on this data and so needs to be more clear with references.
5. The omission of PubMed/MEDLINE needs clarifying.
6. We recommend adding more context to the paper. Can you take a step back and tell the readers about the drivers of this issue (as one reviewer highlights, the publish or perish culture, time pressures during Covid-19)?
Is there any evidence to suggest that retracted articles play a role when developing new research ideas? To what extent is this resulting in research waste? Do retracted articles contribute to meta analyses and what is the potential impact.
7. Is there an inequality angle here? You mention that Sci-Hub is more widely used by researchers in low and middle income settings due to limited institutional access to published material. Does this mean that researchers in those settings have the double burden of not having good access to publications and also seeing a potentially biased subset of research that doesn't account for retractions? What are the implications of this?
8. We are told on Line 103 that there are specific recommendations from COPE 104 related to article retraction as described since 2011 - this should be set up earlier - what are these recommendations? And how are publishing practices insufficient? And for those readers who don't know COPE, it would be

helpful to explain. What is current good practice / approaches that are working? It currently reads as quite one-sided.

9. Perhaps a top 3 changes needed to address the problem, to keep it concise.

10. The argument needs clarification and should come early, e.g there are gaps / issues with identifying retracted articles which has an impact on xx and xxx. We argue that xx approach is needed to identify retracted articles.

A possible outline would be;

Define what retraction is and why it's important

Highlight current approaches to retraction that are working /guidance e.g. COPE's recommendations for retraction

Highlight the gaps in identifying retracted articles e.g. Evidence suggests guidance / COPE's recommendations aren't being followed, (or there is a lack of consistency in retracting articles) and reasons for this (more than guessing)

Discuss the impact of this e.g. what happens when retracted articles aren't identified

What needs to change and how - based on addressing the gaps

So, our topline comment to you is to reflect on and revise the central thesis you wish to get across.

Please let us know in the next two weeks if you intend to submit a revised version of this manuscript; otherwise we will consider other papers we receive on the same general topic.

If you have any questions about these comments or if you would like further clarification, I am happy to have a call with you to discuss this decision. We appreciate your understanding that at this stage, we cannot guarantee eventual acceptance of a revised paper.

To re-submit a revised version, go to <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/bmj> and login to your Author Center. Click on "Manuscripts with Decisions," and then click on "Create a Resubmission," located next to the manuscript number. Then, follow the steps for resubmitting your manuscript. In your cover letter, please state that this is a new submission, revised in response to our comments.

Thank you once again for your interest in publishing your work with The BMJ, and thank you for considering our suggested revisions.

Best wishes,

Dr Nike Odeleye
Clinical Editor
aodeleye@bmj.com

Reviewer: 1

Recommendation:

Comments:

1. When building the rationale for the present analysis, the authors may consider recalling the role played by the 'Publish-or-perish' research culture, and how pressure to publish leads researchers to cut corners, which is pretty alarming, indeed.

2. I find it awkward that the Authors never mention the magnificent job made by the NLM for MEDLINE and PubMed when it comes to identify retractions. There's only a small note almost hidden in Table 1 caption. This should be clearly described in the running text. As an author, I am not particularly happy with how PubMed and PMC are dealing with predatory journals, still what they are doing with the retraction policies is quite an impressive action.

3. The Authors make their case by referring to resources such as RG, Scholar, Sci-Hub, that are not the primary source of information for scholars and authors. Adding to my comment #2, the most frequently consulted online scientific medical resource in the world is MEDLINE®/PubMed, however the Authors chose not to mention this database, which is also publicly available.

4. Line 129: Google Scholar lacks quality control and clear indexing guidelines, this should be conveyed to the reader.

5. Line 150: Sci-Hub: I find it somewhat non-sense reading that Sci-Hub has not implemented any monitoring mechanisms to alert readers to retractions. Isn't it an openly illegal initiative? I do understand that this is becoming a vital source for scholars from low-income countries, and that much more should be done to advance creative commons and open access policies (and their true impact); still I see no relevance in appraising ethical issues in such a controversial initiative. Please, provide more justification for including Sci-Hub in the analyses.

6. Line 173 and foll. Among the solutions to the issue that the authors put forward, adequate attention should be devoted to highlight how PubMed could serve as the reference source for verifying whether a retraction notice exists.

7. Are the Authors aware of the tools that are available in the PubMed query to spot retractions and have a comprehensive list of them? For instance:

Retracted and republished in: `hasretractedandrepublishedin`
Retracted and republished from: `hasretractedandrepublishedfrom`
Retraction in: `hasretractionin`
Retraction of: `hasretractionof`

By typing, for instance, the appropriate PubMed Format tags (e.g., ROF, which stands for retraction of) AND author's name with the TAG [Au], one can verify.
see: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/help/>

8. In this reviewer's opinion adding these strategies and tools would significantly enhance the educational weight of the present submission.

Additional Questions:

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Reviewer: 2

Recommendation:

Comments:

The authors are dealing with a topic of growing importance: the retraction of scientific articles. Their work has been well documented and they have adopted an objective stance toward all issues they have discussed, including the most challenging one due to its illegal nature, such as the use of Sci-Hub. By doing this, they have presented several perspectives that will be very useful for readers and they have included an analysis that has been directed in general at the research ecosystem as well as at the various stakeholders, with recommendations for actions. I do not have any significant objections with the contents of the manuscript or with its format, except for the following comments and recommendations, which authors can take into consideration for submitting a revision:

In page 1, line 28, correct the fragment "identified this retracted article and FM was able to identify it" (avoid using identify twice)

In page 5, line 137, where it says "mainly indexed by researchers in their profiles". I am not sure that is the most precise way of saying it. Indeed they are indexed in Researchgate's database, but more precisely articles are published by their authors.

In page 8, line 174, correct the fragment "Data shown in this analysis show" (avoid using show twice)

Page 8, line 180, you can just say "COPE retraction guidelines"

Page 9, after reading the first paragraph I wondered, how many articles have been retracted? Is there an approximate number? Perhaps the authors wish to express at least the number that Retraction Watch has about this. I think it would be useful for readers to better grasp the issue and to see that it is very serious. The authors have noted the increase in retractions, but perhaps it can be useful to give an approximate number. Or is this approximate number 5,000 as stated in line 222? If so, I did not find it so clear.

Page 9, after reading the second paragraph I wondered about SciHub. The way I believe it still works (unless this has changed) is that it downloads a copy of a given article on demand (when a user requests it) and it adds this copy to its repository for future requests of the same article. If the article is requested before being retracted, then there are no retraction marks (obviously), but this is the copy that remains in SciHub's repository. Hence, I believe that SciHub has to find a more elaborate workaround, given the way it works. However, the same solutions you are proposing may be valid, just run a check against CrossMark and just add a watermark or something...

Page 10, line 248, in the fragment "accept to implement in their daily practice". I think it needs an "it" or "this" "accept to implement this in their daily practice".

Additional Questions:

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