04-May-2023
Unidentified retracted articles in publisher's websites, bibliographic databases, social academic networks, and Sci-Hub black open access website: a problem that should no longer be ignored
BMJ-2022-072929.R1

Dear Dr. Boudry,

Thank you for submitting your work to us and thank you again for your patience with this response. We discussed your resubmission in committee and it was sent out for targeted re-review, which you should see at the end of this email. Present at committee (Huseyin Naci, Juan Franco, Sophia Walker, Jocalyn Clark, Rachael Hinton, Jennifer Rasanathan and myself).

We felt you did a good job of summarising the relevant literature on retracted articles and remain interested in publishing this paper. The topic is important, and we think it will be of interest to our readers. However, we feel the paper requires further revision. We know this has been a long process and appreciate your ongoing time and effort on this paper. We ask you to please revise your text in response to comments from the editors and reviewers and resubmit your manuscript within 4-6 weeks. Editors comments are as follow:

1. Please lay out more clearly the impact and implications for patients of a paper being retracted but not identified as such. How have patients been put at risk? What are the potential consequences in medicine for patient health? Could this lead to a rise in scientific misconduct? Why should the reader be invested? The connection between retracted articles and their implications needs to be strengthened so that readers understand the importance of the issue.

2. We also had concerns about the accuracy of some of your conclusions regarding the impact of the pandemic on article retractions. Given that it takes time for reliable retraction rates to be known, it's probably more appropriate for you to discuss retractions during the pandemic over time: early concern, but latest data shows no overall change from baseline. Please see our recent feature on this here (for which the author interviewed the Director of Retraction Watch).
Relatedly, we were concerned that some of your text did not accurately reflect findings in the papers you cited. Please carefully cross-check all references with your text to ensure you are accurately sharing data with readers.

3. Some of your claims may need greater justification, e.g. Is there any evidence or a particular reason why COPE guidelines are not being followed?

4. Similarly, the methods used for gathering information on retracted articles have raised some questions on validity and reliability and this needs to be addressed (see Bakker comments).

5. Finally, we would ask you to provide greater nuance and balance by acknowledging that there are other reasons for retracted articles not being publicised (e.g. reviewer Bakker).

Minor comments :
- Line 72 - what do issues with journal or publisher mean?

- The point on 'wasted resources' in the introduction is interesting in terms of the impact, and could be expanded.

- The section on 'online survival of unidentified retracted papers' repeats similar points to the example from PLoS and Cell in the introduction; this could be pared down to save you words.

- Sci-fi hub is a site for the illegal download of full texts and as such is not a database, however has been included as one. Please correct.

Along with the revised text, please provide a point by point response to our comments and those of the reviewers. We also ask that you keep the revised manuscript within the word count of 1800-2000 words.

Please note that resubmitting your manuscript does not guarantee eventual acceptance, and that your revised paper may be sent back out for review.

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I hope you will find the comments useful. Please don't hesitate to contact me if anything is unclear or if you have any questions.

Best wishes and we look forward to your revised paper,

Nike Odeleye
Clinical Editor
aodeleye@bmj.com

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competing interests if they exist, or make a no competing interests declaration.

Reviewer: 1

Recommendation:

Comments:
While this is an interesting topic, there are several significant issues with this manuscript which lead me
to conclude that it is not yet suitable for publication.

Perhaps most crucially, no methods are offered to describe how it was that the authors arrived at their
findings. The authors state that "[w]e checked 500 randomly selected retracted articles (from a total of
8559 retracted articles listed in PubMed in April 2021) for the presence of any information allowing
identification of retraction in references and full-text articles." Readers are given no information
regarding how the articles were randomly selected, what information was gathered from the individual
articles and how that information was gathered, how data quality was assured, and so forth. They also
don't speak to the limitations of using PubMed as a data source, given that PubMed has a limited scope
in terms of disciplines of interest and does not have perfect indexing of retracted publications. It is
impossible to determine the validity of the methods or their findings with this little information.

The table of results is also somewhat perplexing. The identification of retracted status is simply
dichotomized as either identified or unidentified, but we have no information regarding what constitutes
being identified. If a retracted publication has its publication type changed to "retracted" but neither its
title nor abstract is annotated to indicate this, does this qualify as being identified? If the retraction
notice were to simultaneously appear when searching for this article, would that constitute being
identified as retracted? There are multiple guidelines and existing best practices on this topic, and it's
not clear if or how these were utilized. Because of the very limited methods provided, the table as it
stands does not feel particularly meaningful. It is also unclear how the authors accounted for duplicate
entries for retracted publications. They note the issue of multiple versions in Google Scholar in an earlier
paragraph, but don't provide details of how they account for multiple versions in their calculations, and
particularly where some versions may be indicated as retracted and others may not.

I also note that the authors seem to oversimplify retractions and the communication of retractions. They
present two reasons why publishers may not consistently indicate that publications have been retracted:
"is it fear for their reputation or ignorance of the seriousness of the problem of retractions?" This is an
unfair assertion. It assumes that the inconsistency with which retractions are noted must either be the
product of ignorance or self-interest and neglect. It does not account for the fact that international
standards regarding the transmission and display of metadata for retracted publications are still under
development, and oversimplifies the transmission of information between publishers, aggregators and
search engines. There is a similar condemnation of aggregators, as the authors state that "they either
never... or imperfectly... update their databases." The authors do not provide evidence that any resource
never updates its database, and do not consider the myriad of reasons why resources are imperfectly
updated. There is an implicit assumption that this is due to willful neglect or ignorance rather than the
possibility that aggregators are also grappling with how to receive, process and display metadata from
the broad range of publishers with whom they are working. While I do not argue against the idea that all
retracted publications should be indicated as such through all platforms, I do push back against the
stated belief that the only reason this is not happening is due to such malicious motives.

There are other, smaller issues with the manuscript. However, given the significance of the
methodological issues, further discussion of minor concerns is unwarranted without significant revision of
the manuscript.

Additional Questions:
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If you have any competing interests (please see BMJ policy) please declare them here: I am the co-chair of the NISO CREC (Communication of Retractions, Removals, and Expressions of Concern) Working Group and have received data for research purposes from the Center for Scientific Integrity, the parent organization of the Retraction Watch Database.

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