Ethical issues and transparency in peer review

Irene Hames, PhD, FRSB @irenehames

ORCID id: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3806-8786

PEERE conference #peere2018, Rome, 8 March 2018
The ‘burden’ of peer review

Is this the right way to think/talk about peer review?

‘Burden’: an oppressive duty, obligation

something difficult or unpleasant you have to deal with or worry about

a duty or misfortune that causes worry, hardship, or distress

Google search results

“burden of peer review” - 96,700
“peer review is broken” - 19,300
“appreciate peer review” - 346
“enjoy peer review” - 311

@irenehames #peere2018
@YourPaperSucks – “Collecting the finest real specimens of reviewer comments”

“I am afraid this manuscript may contribute not so much towards the field's advancement as much as toward its eventual demise”

“I have rarely read a more blown-up and annoying paper in the last couple of years than this hot-air balloon manuscript”

“I found the entire premise of the work to be utterly theoretically bankrupt”

“This paper reads like a woman’s diary, not like a scientific piece of work”

“Have you no command of the English language?”

“This is an interesting manuscript, not because of its results, but because of its complete ignorance of due scientific process”

“The work that this group does is a disgrace to science”

“X has never had an original thought in his life and wouldn’t know what to do with it if he did” (IH)
System is stretched … lacking support, unsustainable?

Being an editor is not just about moving manuscripts through an online peer-review system … editors need training and guidance
Not that long ago …
Review length

- Not a proxy for review quality, but …

- Publons data, ~379,000 reviews: average review length
  2017 = 342 words (2016 = 457)

- This is what 342 words looks like. Is it possible to do a proper review in this length, to comment on all parts of a paper, on the data, its analysis and presentation?
“And underlying these worries was yet another: that scientific articles have been hijacked away from their primary role of communicating scientific discovery to one of demonstrating academic activity.”

Can we trust what we read?

Stop this waste of people, animals and money

Predatory journals have shoddily reporting and include papers from wealthy nations, find David Moher, Larissa Sansone, Kelly Cobey and colleagues.


China’s Publication Bazaar


GLOBAL PREDATION

A sample of 1907 papers in more than 200 supposed predatory journals found that most of the articles come from India. Surprisingly, however, more than half of the papers have authors from higher-income or upper-middle-income countries.

Predatory papers by country and income

*Where papers had more than one corresponding author, the country of the first listed was used.

contained data from >2 million individuals & >8000 animals

“In our view, publishing in predatory journals is unethical”
Erosion of trust in peer review?

- many cases of fake or ‘compromised’ peer review (> 500 retractions on Retraction Watch)

- and …
  - third-party services suggesting fake reviewers
  - editors creating fake reviewer accounts to submit favourable reports
  - editors editing reviews to better fit their decisions
  - ‘imposter’ editors guest-editing issues

- happening in established, reputable journals
Retraction Watch

64 more papers retracted for fake reviews, this time from Springer journals

with 7 comments

This is officially becoming a trend. Springer is pulling another 64 articles from its journals after finding evidence of fake peer reviews, bringing the total number of retractions from the phenomenon now to 230.

Given that there have been about 1,500 papers retracted overall since 2013, when we first reported on this phenomenon, fake peer reviews have been responsible for about 13% of all retractions in the past three years. This isn’t the first time Springer has faced the issue. As owner of the BioMed Central journals, it issued 53 retractions for failed reviews earlier this year.

In a statement, the publisher explains how the latest round of retractions came to light:

Springer confirms that 64 articles are being retracted from 10 Springer subscription journals, after editorial checks spotted fake email addresses, and subsequent internal investigations uncovered fabricated peer review reports. After thorough investigation we have strong reason to believe that the peer review process on these 64 articles was compromised. We reported this to the Committee.

Retraction Watch

"Compromised" peer review hits three papers from Nature Publishing Group

without comments

Nature Publishing Group is retracting three papers today, after an investigation found evidence the peer review process had been compromised.

The publisher issued a statement saying they had notified corresponding authors and institutions associated with the articles, which were all published last year in the journals Cancer Gene Therapy and Stem Cells.

Here’s the note that’s going on each of the papers, they’re the same except for the publication date:

The publishers and editor retract this article in accordance with the recommendations of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). After a thorough investigation we have strong reason to believe that the peer review process was compromised.

Retraction Watch

Seven papers flagged earlier for fake reviews now retracted by Elsevier

with 2 comments

Elsevier has now retracted the seven papers it flagged in October as being affected by fake peer reviews.

If you’re not keeping track, we are. We have logged a total of about 100 retractions for fake peer reviews, in which some aspect of the peer review process becomes compromised — for instance, in the case of the newly retracted papers, authors appear to have created fake email accounts in order to pose as reviewers and give the green light to their own papers.

The same retraction note applies to all of the recently retracted papers:

This article has been retracted at the request of the Editor and the Publisher.

After thorough investigation, the publisher has concluded that the acceptance of this article was based upon the positive advice of at least one fake reviewer report. The report was submitted from a fictitious email account which was paired to the journal as a suggested reviewer by the corresponding author during the submission of the paper.

Retraction Watch

BMC editors update retraction after investigation clears authors of faking peer reviews

with 2 comments

Editors at BMC Central have taken the unusual step of updating a retraction letter after an investigation found the authors were not responsible for a peer-review crisis upon article submission. The paper is one of dozens of other papers retracted in March for fake peer reviews.

This month, the paper’s “clinical application of a novel enhancer associated to drug-resistant prostate cancer” in Drug Resistance UPDATE was retracted due to fake peer reviews. (Retractions for the phenomenon — more about it in a past Slanted feature here — are up to about 170.)

According to the update posted in April, an investigation into the paper by the BMC Central editorial office “clearly demonstrates that they did not participate in influencing the peer review process.”

In a similar way, BMC editors have now retracted the paper “Understanding the role of CA15-3 in cancer and mock cancer tissues” in BioMed Research International on March 14, 2017.

Retraction Watch

Publishers withdraw more than 120 gibberish papers

Conference proceedings removed from subscription databases after scientists reveal they were computer-generated.

Richard Van Noorden

24 February 2014 | Updated 25 February 2014

Sights & Permissions

The publishers Springer and IEEE are removing more than 120 papers from their subscription archives after a French researcher discovered that the works were computer-generated.

The articles were being retracted at the request of the Editor and the Publisher. After thorough investigation, the publisher has concluded that the acceptance of this article was based upon the positive advice of at least one fake reviewer report. The report was submitted from a fictitious email account which was paired to the journal as a suggested reviewer by the corresponding author during the submission of the paper.

For his part, Moon acknowledged suggesting his friends and colleagues as reviewers, telling Retraction Watch that the results “can be mistaken, for fake reviews.” But he said it wasn’t only his mistake. The editors, Moon said, “issued those reviews without confirming the identity of the reviewers.”

Retraction Watch

17 retractions from SAGE journals bring total fake peer review count to 250

without comments

On Monday, we reported on new retractions from Springer journals resulting from fake peer reviews. Yesterday, SAGE — which retracted 60 papers for the same reason and over a longer period – added 17 additional retractions to their list.

The articles were published in five different journals, and one retraction involved authorship fraud in addition to peer review fraud, according to a SAGE spokesperson.

In all, since our investigation found the peer review process had been seriously compromised by fake review details that were supplied to manipulate the peer review process, the investigations and subsequent retractions are a reflection of improved processes and policies prescribed by SAGE to editors and peer review assistants that SAGE further enhanced following a group of retractions in 2014. Today’s retractions are historical in nature and reflect SAGE’s efforts to answer instances of fraud that predates the new process.

Retraction Watch

In more faked peer review news...10 papers pulled by Hindawi

with 7 comments

Guess what? We’ve got more cases of fraudulent peer review to report — or second post of the day is the subject, in fact. In the latest news, Hindawi Publishing Corporation has retracted 10 papers for “fraudulent review reports,” after an investigation of more than 10 papers that had been retracted this summer.

The investigation found that authors (one, Song Jun) a computer engineer at Yangzhou University in China, was involved in submitting the fraudulent review reports for four of the retracted papers, according to the publisher’s CEO. In the case of the other six, the authors didn’t appear to be involved.

Hindawi Publishing Corporation (HPC), which publishes over 100 journals, doesn’t ask authors for potential review suggestions — making a common route for fake peer reviews more difficult. In July, when Hindawi announced they were investigating the papers, they made a statement saying that they suspected the authors had created fake review comments.

The retraction note on Song Jun’s papers — identical except for the title at the beginning — explains that each paper has
Lots of ‘black’ boxes

Transparency
Transparency in peer review

Journal

- type of peer review, processes, who’s involved, who’s making decision/s, expectations, how manuscripts from Editors and EiC handled, what has been peer reviewed/not
- standards and policies, screening done, e.g. textual duplication & images, timelines, TOP guidelines

Paper

- title, abstract, data, availability, accession codes, trial registrations, sample sizes, materials, RRIDs, protocols, reporting guidelines (Nature/Nature journals reporting summary forms & guidance, EMBO Press reporting checklist)
- ethical compliance & approvals

Reviewers & Editors

- accurate personal representation, potential conflicts of interests

Authors

- funding, potential conflicts of interest, appropriate attribution, true authorship listing and details
Switched the lead-author with a co-author who is more senior, in order to increase the likelihood of publication
HSS 10%, STM 23%

Switched my main institutional affiliation to a secondary institutional affiliation in a different region of the world, in order to increase the likelihood of publication
HSS 7%, STM 17%
One thing that could help?

- Increasingly want to see reviews (and author responses) with articles I read, see into the ‘black box’
- Reviewers don’t need to be named
- Would like to see handling/decision editor named
- Would help expose ‘predatory’/questionable journals
Public reports aren’t new … in 1832

Duke of Sussex (President Royal Society), referring to written reports/open practices of some foreign societies, particularly Paris Académie, said that the public reports were

“often more valuable than the original communications upon which they are founded”

Historical Journal DOI: 10.1017/S0018246X17000334
‘Do you mind your identity being made known to the author(s) if they ask?’
“That you would consider making a reviewer’s identity known to the submitting authors is alarming in the extreme. How can such a practice not but undermine the peer review process and lower standards? ... I would hold the journal, not the reviewers, responsible for the evaporation of your journal’s credibility, and for an inexcusable erosion of the philosophical framework of modern plant biology.”
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Scientist-driven initiative to promote transparency and innovation in life sciences communication

‘Transparency, Recognition, and Innovation in Peer Review in the Life Sciences’* – meeting Feb 2018 #bioPeerReview Webcast archive http://www.tvworldwide.com/events/peerreview/180207/ - majority of participants favoured:

- Publishing the content of peer reviews (with or without the reviewers’ names) and making these reports a formal part of the scholarly record with an associated DOI
- Formal recognition and credit for peer review activities from funding agencies and institutions
- Acknowledging all contributors to a peer review report (such as students and postdocs) when submitting it to a journal

COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers:
“The names of any individuals who have helped with the review should be included so that they are associated with the manuscript in the journal’s records and can also receive due recognition for their efforts.”
Committee on Publication Ethics https://publicationethics.org/
Social, cultural & global considerations

@irenehames @peere2018

Emilio M. Bruna @BrunaLab
Feb 8
So much of the discussion we heard is based on the funding and academic evaluation systems in Europe and the USA, which can be radically different from those elsewhere. #bioPeerReview

To say “everyone should sign reviews and post preprints” ignores the cultural and historical reasons underlying why so many of the world’s scientists currently don’t feel comfortable doing so.

#bioPeerReview

11:29 PM - 8 Feb 2018
14 Retweets 42 Likes

Emilio M. Bruna @BrunaLab
Feb 8

@KatuiDzirasa: what is the political effect of making scientific criticism public - can negative reviews be weaponized? And what does the next generation think about open peer review, especially for those who feel vulnerable in their field?

#bioPeerReview

mrgunn
Feb 8

Good to hear this addressed. Those arguing for not allowing anonymity need to consider this.

#bioPeerReview

Chris Pickett @ChrisPickettS
Feb 8

@KatuiDzirasa Good question. How can/has openness been weaponized to really shut down an open discussion/debate? #bioPeerReview

Show this thread

2:17 PM - 8 Feb 2018
3 Retweets 5 Likes

Iain Cheeseman @iaincheeseman
Feb 8

Really powerful and compelling talk from Kaf Dzirasa on challenges for open peer review for junior researchers. Past experience influences future choices and behavior.

#bioPeerReview

2:34 PM - 8 Feb 2018
1 Retweet 3 Likes
Legal implications?

Lots of discussion about litigious authors & reviewers, lobbyist groups, and muckraking journalists in open review, but nearly everyone saying benefits outweigh risks #bioPeerReview

Deafening silence when the question comes up of who protects the few who get legal threats, summons to congress, etc on the basis of an open review. #bioPeerReview
Transparency as indicator of peer-review quality

- Can help distinguish legitimate journals from ‘predatory’/questionable journals

- Jelte Wicherts (2016):
  - proposal: transparency of the peer-review process is an indicator of journal peer-review quality
  - has developed and tested a 14-item tool for assessing transparency of the peer-review process based on journals’ websites
  - two things most strongly predicted rejection of flawed (hoax) articles: disclosure of identity of handling/decision editor (#6) and presence of publication ethics statements on journal website (#8)
### Table 4. The revised tool and descriptive statistics of relevance ratings by 16 Dutch academic librarians (Study 3).

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doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0147913.e004

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Grazie mille! ... questions?

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