

# Retraction Watch

Tracking retractions as a window into the scientific process

## BioMed Central retracting 43 papers for fake peer review

with 20 comments



BioMed Central is retracting 43 papers, following [their investigation](#) into 50 papers that raised suspicions of fake peer review, possibly involving third-party companies selling the service.

In November 2014 we [wrote about fake peer reviews](#) for Nature; at that point there had been about 110 retractions across several journals. The addition of [16 retractions by Elsevier](#) for the same reason, and today's 43 from BMC, brings retractions resulting from the phenomenon up to about 170.

BMC has also contacted institutions regarding 60 additional papers that were rejected for publication, but seem to be part of the same kind of scam. Regarding the third-party agents, BMC senior editor of scientific integrity Elizabeth Moylan [writes](#):

Some of the manipulations appear to have been conducted by third-party agencies offering language-editing and submission assistance to authors. It is unclear whether the authors of the manuscripts involved were aware that the agencies were proposing fabricated reviewers on their behalf or whether authors proposed fabricated names directly themselves.

When we asked for more information on these third parties, a representative for the journal told us:

We've been told some things in confidence that we're not reporting on our blog, and the reason we're not is we don't have enough evidence to point fingers. What we've done all along is point out the patterns that we have noticed, and we've talked to other publishers and we've talked to [the Committee on Publishing Ethics] to make sure that people know how we're stopping them.

In an attempt to limit submission of fake peer reviewers, BMC has turned off the automated system that let authors provide contact information for potential reviewers, which we tapped in our [Nature story](#) as a major contributor to the problem. Authors will still be able to suggest reviewers in their cover letters.

BMC has also sent an email to editors of BMC journals that addresses the retractions and how peer review suggestions will function without an automated option:

We appreciate that this functionality is useful and timesaving, but we believe it is the ease with which author suggested reviewer suggestions can be 'clicked' through that made it possible for authors or third party agencies to manipulate our systems. It would not be appropriate to switch the facility back on for some journals and not for others, so with this in mind and in the absence of any secure means of protecting against such manipulation across all of our 250+ journals we have made the decision to leave this functionality switched off.

Authors will still be able to suggest potential peer reviewers in their cover letter on submission. We are updating the submission system to inform authors on how they can suggest reviewers and also updating our Information for Authors pages to tell authors that they may use their cover letter to suggest reviewers, but that they should provide institutional email addresses where possible, or information which will help the editor to verify the identity of the reviewer. Editors who find author suggestions useful and are happy to implement some simple checks on the validity of the suggestions are welcome to ask authors to suggest potential peer reviewers in their cover letter.

Here's the text BMC is using for the notices, most of which have gone live:

The Publisher and Editor regretfully retract this article [1] because the peer-review process was inappropriately influenced and compromised. As a result, the scientific integrity of the article cannot be guaranteed. A systematic and detailed investigation suggests that a third party was involved in supplying fabricated details of potential peer reviewers for a large number of manuscripts submitted to different journals. In accordance with recommendations from COPE we have retracted all affected published articles, including this one. It was not possible to determine beyond doubt that the authors of this particular article were aware of any third party attempts to manipulate peer review of their manuscript.

We are waiting on the full list of retracted papers, but in the meantime, [here's what comes up from a Google search of the retraction notice](#). We found at least seven [in the \*Journal of Orthopaedic Surgery and Research\*](#).

**Update 6 p.m. EST 3/26/15:** Here's a [link to the retractions](#), which a BMC spokesperson told us went live today.

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Written by Cat Ferguson

March 26th, 2015 at 12:05 pm

Posted in [biomedcentral](#), [faked emails](#), [freely available](#), [orthopedics](#), [peer review](#), [surgery retractions](#)

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## Comments



- *Marco* March 26, 2015 at 12:49 pm

It looks like the European Journal of Medical Research was hardest hit. I count 15 retractions for that journal alone.

Let us hope that CAS will do something about this. A retraction is bad enough, but this whole sad story has hit a lot of different groups all over China.

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- [jim steele](#) March 26, 2015 at 3:19 pm

How do we get an investigation of the climate paper “Impacts of Extreme Weather and Climate on Terrestrial Biota”

[http://landscapesandcycles.net/American Meteorological Society\\_half-truth.html](http://landscapesandcycles.net/American_Meteorological_Society_half-truth.html)

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- *Steven McKinney* March 26, 2015 at 3:48 pm

Jim

This is not a climate change denial website, it is a website discussing retractions.

Apparently you attempted (unsuccessfully) to instigate an investigation of the paper you mention. Submit your findings for publication if you disagree with the findings of that paper. I see nothing in that paper warranting investigation. That paper has nothing to do with the topic of this Retraction Watch blog entry.

Hopefully both your and my comments here will be retracted for their lack of relevance to this topic.

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- *Gary* March 27, 2015 at 9:09 am

A large number of retractions once again raises the question of recompense for those people who pay for their journal subscriptions... if a journal retracts a large number of papers in one year (e.g. 15) do the subscribers get a months money back?

I am guessing not.....

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- *Merger* March 27, 2015 at 2:30 pm

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Nature merges with Springer:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/15/publishing-ma-idUSF9N0TV00F20150115>

“The publisher of science magazines Nature and Scientific American is merging with private equity-owned peer Springer Science+Business Media, creating a group with 1.5 billion euros (\$1.75 billion) in annual sales and 13,000 employees.”

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- *Manuel* March 27, 2015 at 7:35 pm

Well, I really think is time for the scientific community to start implementing cryptographic protocols to sign their reviews, safeguarding the integrity of the publications model. I mean, the technology exists and it is very straight forward to use, any scientist should be capable of managing a private/public key pair to prove his digital identity, thus creating a system that is completely secure and trustable.

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- *Nikolai Slavov* March 28, 2015 at 11:15 am

Open peer-reviews are harder to fake and manipulate. In fact, the only certain approach to assure the origin and the quality of peer-reviews is to make their contents public and the reviewers non-anonymous. [Journals should publish the contents of peer-reviews](#). I see no reason against publishing peer-reviews, only benefits, including lower rate of fake reviews.

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- *darlene* March 30, 2015 at 7:25 pm

Yes no surprise here as it seems more and more are chasing the all mighty dollar at the expense of TRUTH . A scientist ( who died penniless by the way ) once said and i quote his wise words ... science is but a perversion of itself unless it has , as its ultimate goal the betterment of humanity ... nicola tesla 1919 , Now that is a true scientist and a great humanbeing .. unlike these bought out hacks who i hope one day PAY THE PRICE for their lies . tc all .

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• *JATdS* March 30, 2015 at 8:18 pm

Darlene, I beg to differ about some of the statements you have made. I am aware of many scientists who are striking it really rich, either through good salaries and benefits, travel expenses (let's not forget how costly it is to travel internationally, and how travel perks could be even better than salaries), all for low productivity and in several cases, erroneous science. It is precisely because the playing field has become so distorted, with some making masses of money (or other benefits) while others are penniless, that there is anger, bitterness and resentment. It is not so much the fact that there is an underlying class war-fare in the underbelly of the science beast, it is the fact that some (difficult to quantify at present) are benefitting unfairly. The argument that most frequently binds many scientific activists and critics, such as myself, is why should a scientist even be receiving a salary, or even have an academic post, if their literature is problematic? In my case, this background question lingers as I see more and more papers being questioned at PubPeer. Because it indicates, more and more, that there is an increasing body of scientists who may be benefitting (financially and otherwise) from less-than-perfect work. As equally as we should be critical of these scientists, especially where patterns emerge, so too should we be critical of editors, journals or publishers that also show "patterns" of poor quality control, but who continue to command top dollar for access to flawed science or "corrupted" literature. "They" (i.e., those we criticize) will continually try to silence our voices of discontent, and the only way to drown out their suppression of our rights to criticize what validly needs to be criticized, is by encouraging others who are minimally conscientious, to speak out, be vocal about their concerns. It is precisely because money is quite sparse in most academic circles, that scientists tend to want to stay silent, so as not to sacrifice the very little that they have worked hard to achieve: their salaries. Their argument is equally fair (who doesn't want to defend their financial security?), but silence is one of the greatest problems we face today (i.e., silence and being silenced). It is sad that scientists have to hide behind anonymous masks to report errors on sites like PubPeer. Finally, there are many corrupting factors, but sadly money still remains the largest one. Without that stimulus, we would likely lose most pseudo-scientists who are only there to predate and parasitize the system.

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• [Edward John Ciaccio](#) March 30, 2015 at 10:42 pm

The way I watch for this at my journal is that only one suggested referee, with university email address, will get an invite from me, and I don't give them as much weight as the independent reviewers.

[Reply](#) [Link](#) [Quote](#)



• *Free mail user* March 30, 2015 at 11:36 pm

Edward, does Elsevier know – and endorsed – your selection policies? I, for example, use a Yahoo free e-mail address for two reasons: a) it is convenient; b) I am retired. What your

personal policies suggest is that anyone with a Yahoo, Gmail, rediffmail or other such popular e-mails are invalid researchers or scientists. May I suggest that you reconsider adjusting your policies, because they may be labeled as something much more negative, despite your noble and good intentions.

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• [Klaus Kayser](#) March 31, 2015 at 4:28 am

Dear all,  
all these retractions and the discussions are useless, as the real reason is the globalization of science. All big publishers are now-a-days dependent upon global investors, where the money has to go. It should be prohibited that big companies such as Springer or Elsevier etc. serve for money only. Discussion of reviews, whether they are anonymous or not (there are many publications) do not focus on the main issue: financial pollution and split up of science.

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• [Suggestion](#) March 31, 2015 at 1:06 pm

Klaus, welcome to the club of understanding. You have not stated anything new, in fact. We know this already and have known this for a long time. Yet, unfortunately, these STM publishers still represent the “safest” repository of information for scientists, and that is why scientists continue to invest so heavily in them, either intellectually, or financially. The sad part of what you state is that you and I know it, but so many don’t. Or those many others that do are so entrenched in their own selfish auto-glorification to fulfill a legend, that they do not set aside effort to beat the system’s ills. So, I don’t think that all retractions and discussions are useless. Retractions reflect two large ills: on the part of some authors; on the part of the current publishing system in place. Now, if the discussion you are wanting to have is on how much profit are publishers making based on scientific papers that carry errors, or worse problems, then this is definitely a valuable discussion worth having. Why not bring forth your ideas and knowledge so that we can channel your disappointment and anger into something pro-active?

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• [Edward John Ciaccio](#) March 31, 2015 at 2:02 pm

Dear Free Mail User,  
You have a point. If I really need more reviewers, I will look up the proposed referee lacking a university email, and see what their email is online. Sometimes they have a university email, or they may just use the email also noted by the authors – gmail, yahoo, etc., but now as I have verified it I am glad to use it.

Elsevier makes no restrictions on its editors, at least those whose journals are doing well and who don’t get many complaints or retractions. I work very hard to keep the authors, referees, my

editorial board, and my publisher happy. It's very rewarding to have authors who are happy to submit their work to the journal.

It's commendable that you still review. Often people who have retired will tell me that they are no longer available as a referee.

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• *Free mail user* March 31, 2015 at 3:08 pm

Edward. Your attitude is commendable. Flexibility as an editor is essential and especially in these rapidly changing times. However, in some respects, as a former EIC myself, I have been where you are now. And let me tell you that self-sacrifice in the name of journal integrity will be self-destructive, unless this is what you envision as part of your "legend". Note, I am not criticizing your efforts. These are excellent. I am questioning what appears to be a one-man show at sustaining "quality". Try to imagine if you step out of the ring for a few months, or forever. Ask yourself: would this Elsevier journal be able to sustain the same level of quality control if you did not exist? If yes, then the system is working well. If no, or even if there is some hesitation, then you are working for the wrong reasons. Given your frank openness, and willingness to discuss your editorial position and attitudes, are you rewarded financially or in any other way by Elsevier, for your role as EIC, processing 1250+ papers a year?

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• *JATdS* March 31, 2015 at 11:36 pm

Nikolai and YouKnowBestOfAll, you are in fact almost 100% correct. The best review system is open peer, but not only. Traditional peer review should not be abandoned, because it has its benefits, despite its weaknesses [1], and there should be another two quality control steps: pre-peer review, in which authors gather their own peer reviews, and post-publication peer review (PPPR). So, in essence, an as-perfect-as-possible quality control system would/should have these 4 components. The PPPR component is extremely important now, because it allows the wider peer community that was not involved, to get involved. The "excluded" majority most likely has a lot to say about the content of published papers (much to the horror of most authors, no doubt who presumed that traditional publishing implied a safe ticket for their papers), but only 2-5 individuals on average get to draw conclusions and define the fate and destiny of a scientific paper.

The current system is almost laughable, if not totally ridiculous. The sad thing is that this is the best we have. Yet, despite our increasing calls for reform, the mainstream publishers, both STM and OA, are just simply enjoying the unending exploitation of the FREE peer pool (in most cases). When the intellectual base is being so abused (i.e., exploited), without much apparent resistance, in return for massive profits, then this is not time for a change. It is time for a revolution. What the publishers will do is to sweep criticisms under the rug, and soften the tone of the crisis with marketing and flowery terminology. And their strategy is working. For one simple reason: they have to ensure their own survival. And that means profits, too. So, going back to my first line, indeed, open peer reviews is one small positive reform that is required, but something much larger is required in this pool of chameleon publishers who adjust their colour

as the environment in which they find themselves changes.

Don't get me wrong, some of the publishers I most criticise are still the "best" choice around. In essence, a scientist wants to know about the security and dissemination of his/her intellect, and so, the issue of open or not open peer review systems will always take a back seat, or land up in the trunk.

[1] Teixeira da Silva, J.A., Dobránszki, J. (2015) Problems with traditional science publishing and finding a wider niche for post-publication peer review. *Accountability in Research: Policies and Quality Assurance* 22(1): 22-40.

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08989621.2014.899909#.VJXPV0oBg>

DOI: 10.1080/08989621.2014.899909

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