

Retraction Watch

Tracking retractions as a window into the scientific process

Physics journal retracts paper without alerting author

Written by Ivan Oransky

October 1st, 2016 at 9:50 am

An Elsevier journal has angered an author by removing his study without telling him.

After spending months asking the journal why it removed the paper — about a heavily debated theorem in physics — and getting no response, the author threatened to seek damages from the journal and publisher for “permanently stigmatizing” his work. Yesterday, an Elsevier representative told the author what happened: Experts told the journal the paper had a major mistake, so the journal decided to withdraw the study, but failed to tell the author due to an “internal error.”

That explanation didn’t satisfy study author [Joy Christian](#), scientific director of the Einstein Centre for Local-Realistic Physics in Oxford, UK, who has demanded the journal either republish the article or remove it and return the copyright to him, or he will pursue legal action.

Here’s the cryptic [publisher’s note](#) for “[Local causality in a Friedmann–Robertson–Walker spacetime](#):”

This article was erroneously included in this issue. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause.

The study — published in the *Annals of Physics* — undermines Bell’s theorem, a [cornerstone of modern quantum mechanics](#), which has divided physicists for years. It has two active PubPeer threads for it: [One for its earlier preprint version](#), and another [for its online version](#), both of which were started by the same researcher, [Richard Gill](#) from Leiden University in the Netherlands. Gill told us he and others contacted the journal to raise concerns about the study, but he doesn’t think the paper should have been removed.

After months of asking the journal why the paper had been removed, yesterday Christian received a response from [Marc Chahin](#), an executive publisher at Elsevier, saying that his paper had been withdrawn from the journal, adding:

Unfortunately, we failed to inform you about this decision due to an internal error and I

apologize for that.

This is the [second time in one week](#) we've reported that an Elsevier journal removed a paper without telling the author.

Chahin's email includes another letter, which he said was formulated by the journal's editorial board, but not sent out due to an "internal error." It reads:

In your case, soon after the acceptance of your paper was announced, several experts in the field have sent us a correspondence to report the error in your manuscript.

The letter goes on to say:

After our editorial meeting, we have concluded that your result is in obvious conflict with a proven scientific fact, i.e., violation of local realism that has been demonstrated not only theoretically but experimentally in recent experiments, and thus your result could not be generally accepted by the physics community. On this basis, we have made such a decision to withdraw your paper.

In his reply to Chahin, Christian writes that he believes the article was removed for political reasons, as "there is absolutely no scientific basis" for the decision. As such:

I demand that my article is either (1) published again in its final form (cf. the attachment), or (2) completely removed from all your publicly accessible websites without any trace, reverting all copyrights back to me as soon as possible. I am willing to forget the damage Annals of Physics and Elsevier has already caused (including the loss of my ten months in the review process) if you are able to satisfy my demand (1) or (2) above. In case you are unable to satisfy either of my demands (1) or (2), then I will have no choice but to seek legal action.

The journal is edited by [Brian Greene](#), a [prominent theoretical physicist](#) at Columbia University in New York. He has not responded to requests for comment.

We initially learned of this story after receiving a chain of correspondence between Christian and the journal, as he sought answers for why the paper had disappeared. In an email to journal officials dated September 28, Christian wrote:

...my article was actually published online for about a month, from 30 June 2016 onwards, and has been downloaded and cited by me and other scientists over the past few months, in accordance with the DOI and related instructions provided by the publisher on the previously purchasable and downloadable article. But then it was mysteriously removed from the journal's website without even a hint of notification to me.

Christian went on to point out that the current [PDF version of the publisher's note](#) is followed by 12 blank pages, adding:

When I signed the copyright agreement requested by Elsevier it was with the understanding that my article will be either accepted for publication or rejected, not that it will be replaced by blank pages with permanent stigma attached to it for anyone to exploit for eternity, and in a manner that would prevent me from publishing it elsewhere with any scientific credibility, or seek acceptance from my peers otherwise.

Gill said he critiqued the study for containing controversial claims that downplay Bell's

theorem, and as well as “elementary” mathematical errors and “self-contradictions,” but told us he didn’t think the paper should have been removed. Doing so will trigger further “conspiracy” and bring more attention to it, he said, whereas if it remained published, it would have been “forgotten” or “ignored.”

Two more of Christian’s papers are also being [questioned on PubPeer](#); one of [these threads](#) was started by Gill, and contains more than 750 comments.

Christian and Gill have a [troubled history](#), which has [played out on physics message boards](#).