

Can scientific papers be unretracted?

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Introduction

Retraction of scientific papers makes it possible to "unpublish" a paper when a decision about its publication was premature. This is possible in electronic publishing, when the published items can be still edited, even long after their publication, as opposite to classical printed items, when the publisher cannot control the published items. A recent example shows that the decision about retraction can also be premature or at least debatable. What then? In principle the publisher can "unretract" a retracted article, that is, withdraw their decision about the retraction. However, retraction notes are indexed in scientific databases as WoS and Scopus, and archived, and the publisher cannot control these databases or archives. The other problem is that the decision about unretraction can also be premature (and so forth), and this may result in a loop of retractions and unretractions.

The citations of retracted papers and of retraction notes, and citations in retracted papers and in retraction notes are counted in scientific databases as the other citations, that is, it is not possible to automatically correct for them. The contribution of citations of retracted papers and of retraction notes, and of citations in retracted papers and in retraction notes to the total number of citations is negligible in large datasets, but at certain aggregation levels (e.g., in less successful journals and scientists), such a correction may have a substantial effect on the citation counts.

Case study

Machacek and Srcholec (2021) published a paper on predatory publishing in *Scientometrics*. Their paper was retracted (Machacek and Srcholec, 2022) by the Editor-in-Chief. The retracted article received 49 citations (April 2025), which is well above the average in *scientometrics* and in *Scientometrics*.

A group of outstanding bibliometricians (Abramo et al., 2023) criticized the decision about the retraction, and received an answer from the Editor-in-Chief (Zhang, 2023). In the meantime Machacek and Srcholec (2022a) republished their retracted article in another journal, and the new version received further 20 citations. Some authors citing the republished version might not be aware of the original (retracted) version. In contrast most authors who recently cited the original version were aware that they cited an retracted article, because the availability of printed journals is limited, and most scientist use the articles loaded from Internet, where retracted articles are clearly marked as such.

Most citations of Machacek and Srcholec (2021) and of Machacek and Srcholec (2022a) refer to the substance of their article(s?) and only a few of them refer to the very fact that the article was retracted.

On top of discussions in journal articles, the retraction was discussed by Retraction Watch, and in two items, which look like short papers in *Scientometrics* (published on the Web page of *Scientometrics*), but they do not have volume or page numbers.

Discussion

Predatory journals discussed by Machacek and Srcholec in their retracted paper are a sensitive topic, and obviously the editors and publishers of journals deemed predatory will protest against such a classification of their journals. There is neither commonly accepted definition of predatory journals not a sharp border between predatory and non-predatory journals. The history of Beall's list is the most well-known example of such an attitude of editors and publishers.

Due to the touchiness of the topic, the editorial decisions with respect to papers on predatory journals should be made with a special care including the anticipation that someone will feel offended by the publication. The topic of

predatory journals is not unique in this respect. There are numerous equally sensitive topics in health care, religion science, ecology, etc.

Touchy topics cannot be completely avoided in science. Especially the predatory publishing became an essential part of the scientific landscape.

Two papers by Machacek and Srholec created a dangerous precedent: two scientific papers of the same authors, under the same title and with basically the same substance. This situation could have been avoided when the editor had a chance of having withdrawn their decision about subtraction, for example after reaction of other scientists to subtraction, as described in the above case study.

Study in progress

This is not clear if the above story of the paper by Machacek and Srholec, that is, re-publication of the once retracted article in another journal, is unique, or more examples like this can be found. The study is in progress.

References

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