

From predatory journals to dubious reviewers: emerging forms of scientific misconduct

Rodrigo Ferraz Ramos¹, Lisiane Sobucki², Tine Grebenc³, Zaida Inês Antonioli¹

¹ Department of Soil Science, Universidade Federal de Santa Maria, Santa Maria, RS, Brazil.

² Department of Biological and Environmental Sciences, Universidade Tecnológica Federal do Paraná, Medianeira, PR, Brazil.

³ Department of Forest Physiology and Genetics, Slovenian Forestry Institute, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

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Dear Editor,

A recent editorial published in *Einstein*⁽¹⁾ brought to light an urgent and highly relevant discussion for the scientific community: the trap of predatory journals. This is directly connected to another equally concerning problem, namely the fragmentation of research data into the smallest publishable units, known as “salami publication”.⁽²⁾ These issues are commonly associated with financial consequences. There have been numerous observations of how publishers and their editorial policies aim to economically exploit authors and their institutions and encourage a direct flow of funds from funders to publishers of scientific publications.^(3,4) All these phenomena reflect distortions in academic evaluation systems, affecting not only early career scientists but also experienced researchers.

We argue that at least two structural factors within academia are associated with these practices: The first is the intense pressure for productivity (“publish or perish”), which particularly affects faculty members and researchers and, when combined with insufficient guidance for young scientists, creates a favorable environment for many to succumb to the promise of rapid, pay-to-publish outlets. The second factor is that, even when aware of the risks, some researchers opt for the easier path, believing that a voluminous curriculum — albeit of low impact — will ensure greater academic prestige. From Dejours’ perspective, this dynamic reflects a production model oriented toward quantitative targets and numerical indicators that disregard the quality and depth of scientific output, fostering a logic in which “time is money” and the imperative for numbers prevails over the meaning and value of intellectual work.⁽⁵⁾

The rapid advancement of generative artificial intelligence tools has further aggravated this situation. The use of these technologies to generate reviews and manuscripts, combined with the promise of rapid publication offered by predatory journals, tends to inflate the volume of low-quality articles available in scientific repositories.⁽⁶⁾ Kellner described this scenario as emblematic of “bad science”: publications lacking methodological rigor, characterized by poor scientific writing and non-reproducible results,⁽⁷⁾ and, in many cases, by inadequate or even absent disclosure of the use of generative artificial intelligence tools. Vieira et al. went further, raising the concern that even

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Claudio Roberto Cernea
Hospital Israelita Albert Einstein,
São Paulo, SP, Brazil
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5899-0535>

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when adequately used and referenced, such tools may compromise authors' originality and intellectual autonomy, fostering relationships of dependency.⁽⁸⁾

No system is 100% foolproof, and even in reputable journals, unethical practices may occur, potentially compromising the integrity of the peer-review process. There is documented evidence that malicious authors have suggested reviewers using falsified email addresses, allowing the reviews to be routed back to themselves or to accomplices, thereby accelerating favorable reports and facilitating acceptance.⁽⁹⁾ Editorial investigations and databases such as Retraction Watch, have documented dozens of retractions across major publishers. These cases were later shown to involve peer reviews generated by fictitious accounts controlled by the authors themselves or by third-party intermediaries, a practice known as fake peer review.⁽⁹⁾ Combined with the ethical problems described above, such practices are fueling a silent crisis in science, including in well-established journals and publishing houses.

Some mechanisms for detecting of scientific publishing misconduct and for removing indexed journals exists, and recent cases particularly illustrate the depth of this crisis. Clarivate, for example, temporarily removed the Journal Impact Factor of Chemosphere, a prominent scientific journal, from the Web of Science after at least eight articles were retracted due to evidence of post-publication manipulation. Another example involves the open-access journal eLife, which announced a controversial editorial shift toward a "publish-then-review" model, whereby all submitted manuscripts are published together with reviewer reports upon payment of publication fees.⁽¹⁰⁾ In addition, other well-established journals from different fields, such as Environmental Science and Pollution Research in environmental sciences, Climate Change Economics in economics, and Activities, Adaptation & Aging in medicine and gerontology, were recently and temporarily removed from the Web of Science under suspicion of citation manipulation.

Taken together — data fragmentation, predatory publishing, falsification of reviewer identities, and citation manipulation — these practices constitute clear violations of the ethical principles that sustain "good science." For authors, the consequences are direct and long-lasting, particularly for junior researchers, undermining their academic credibility and reputation. For editors and reviewers, this increases the difficulty of conducting fair and rigorous peer reviews. For society, the impact is even more serious: public trust in scientific results may be eroded, compromising the credibility of technologies based on large datasets and therapies supported by distorted meta-analyses.

In light of this scenario, a pressing question emerges: What can be done? We believe that an urgent path forward lies in strengthening institutional spaces for dialogue and ethical training aimed at guiding researchers in the practice of good science. A first step may be to revisit a fundamental discussion: what defines a high-quality scientific article? It is imperative to overcome the reductionist view that equates quality solely with bibliometric indicators or impact indices, as well as the distorted notion that academic prestige is measured by publication counts alone.⁽¹¹⁾ Such metrics should not be treated as synonymous with the intrinsic quality of scientific work, nor should publication volume serve as the sole criterion for professional recognition. Some countries and funding agencies are already paving the way in this direction. However, immediate and responsible action is required to defend the ethics of science, transparency, and a genuine commitment to the advancement of knowledge.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The underlying content is included in the manuscript.

AUTHORS' STATEMENT ON GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT to assist with language refinement and minor grammatical editing. After using this tool, the authors carefully reviewed and revised the text as needed and assume full responsibility for the content of the final manuscript.

AUTHORS' INFORMATION

Ramos RF: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6414-376X>
 Sobucki L: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1786-1048>
 Grebenc T: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4035-8587>
 Antonioli ZI: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2036-8710>

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