

Retractions Represent Failure

Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva

P. O. Box 7, Miki-cho post office, Ikenobe 3011-2, Kagawa-ken, 761-0799, Japan
Email: jaimetex@yahoo.com

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Abstract

A retraction in science is the removal of a scientific paper from the literature's records. Formerly and still on occasion today, retractions would involve the complete removal of all traces of the paper, including authors' names, abstract and manuscript, what is now commonly termed a stealth or silent retraction. Despite what appears to be an increase in the number of retractions, retraction notices remain fairly opaque, most likely to limit litigation, but thus not serving a useful purpose for science. This letter shows how retractions represent different levels of failure.

Keywords: correction; erratum; retraction notice; silent or stealth retraction

1. What is a Retraction?

In science, a retraction refers to the removal of a scientific paper from the scientific record. In days gone by, and still on occasion today, scientific papers that are removed without leaving any trace of that record are referred to as silent or stealth retractions (Teixeira da Silva, 2016a). Such retractions lack accountability by the publisher and may represent a threat to science's integrity because no party is held accountable for what was published. In general, retraction notices should indicate the reason for the retraction and indicate what was wrong or faulty to merit the paper being struck from the academic record. One would thus expect an academic publisher, upon the knowledgeable advice of the editors, to include such details. Despite this expectation, guidelines for retractions and wording on retractions vary widely among leading science publishers, surprisingly even among COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics) members (Teixeira da Silva and Dobránszki, 2016). An increase in science activism, vigilantism and awareness of the failure of the traditional peer review system (Teixeira da Silva and Dobránszki, 2015a) may be spurring a rise in the absolute number of retractions, although that number may appear to be constant or linear simply as a result of the concomitant rise in the number of scientific papers being published (Saunders, 2016). As an increasing number of errors become detected, so too are the authorship, editors and publishers being held more accountable. Failure by any of these parties to respond to and correct verifiable errors in the literature may constitute academic and professional misconduct (Teixeira da Silva, 2016b), although such policies need to be first widely accepted by the majority of peers in a specific discipline.

2. Different Reasons and Causes for Retraction

Overall, retractions represent a failure by the education system, by authors, by editors and by publishers. This section examines different causes for retractions and hypothesizes some reasons why each type of retraction may take place. Retractions caused by authorship issues may reflect cultural differences in what constitutes valid authorship, an issue that is increasingly become more complex as large author groups and collaborative partnerships increase. Retractions caused by duplicate publications may reflect poor advisory and supervisory frameworks in a laboratory or research institute, or may reflect a desperate desire to be more productive when faced with pressure in the "publish or perish" culture, as scientists seek greater recognition for their work. This category may also include retractions caused by figure or data manipulation, or fake data, which may be purely erroneous, or wishfully manipulative. Retractions caused by breaches of ethical policies or stated author guidelines may reflect unclear and ambiguous policies, or may reflect poor readership of those policies, especially if they are excessively complex. Retractions caused by unresponsive authors should only take place after an author's institution has been consulted, especially if the author has deceased (Teixeira da Silva and Dobránszki, 2015b). Retractions caused by the manipulation of citations take place when citation cartels may be operating in which an "I rub your back if you rub mine" mentality exists in which two colluding journals may agree to cite each other with the sole purpose of increasing metrics such as the impact factor, the phenomenon of citation

stacking (Heneberg, 2016), and can involve authors or editors. More rarely can one see retractions caused by citation or reference errors, which may instead result in an erratum or corrigendum. Retractions that result from the use of false names and/or author identities, false emails or institutional affiliations, or the creation of false or forged co-author or peer reviewer identities, in a bid to speed up the peer review process, to defraud editors and to submit false peer reviewer reports reflect a weakness of the publisher and editors in detecting honest from false information. Retractions of false stories, hoaxes or stings occur on occasion, but such a rule is not being applied uniformly (Teixeira da Silva and Al-Khatib, 2016), most likely as a result of the small sample size of such cases known to date. Retractions caused by the failure to declare conflicts of interest (COIs), most commonly financial COIs, may result from the protection of financial sources of income or support, such as grants, or from the plain inability to determine a valid COI from an invalid one. Retractions may be published when authors detect errors in their methodologies, such as mistaken cell lines (e.g., Neimark, 2015) or reagents, or errors in statistical analyses that disprove the stated conclusions drawn. Retractions may also be related to unreliable findings, unreproducible methods, or disagreements on published conclusions as new evidence that contradicts older evidence emerges. Retractions also exist when authors refuse to pay fees, but these are less common. Finally, retractions may exist when publishers accidentally publish a paper twice, as a result of processing or clerical errors. Although this list for reasons for retraction is not exhaustive, it indicates that retractions can exist for multiple reasons, ranging from purposeful and malicious to innocent and accidental. All however, reflect a failure at an individual, editorial, institutional or organizational (publisher) level. Retractions thus represent some form of failure.

3. Disclaimer and Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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