

Editors with multiple retractions, but who serve on journal editorial boards: Case studies

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Abstract

In a recent opinion paper (<https://doi.org/10.3897/ese.2022.e95926>), it was argued that individuals with multiple retractions or a record of academic misconduct should not serve as editors, including as editors-in-chief, on the editorial boards of scholarly or academic journals. As a first step towards appreciating how such a policy could be applied in practice, the presence of 30 individuals listed on the Retraction Watch Leaderboard on editorial boards was screened. Six cases are highlighted to gain an appreciation of the potential reputational risks that journals and publishers might incur by including individuals with a tainted academic record on editorial boards. Given the reputational, legal and other risks associated with this type of assessment and decision, more formal positioning and guidance are needed by global ethics policy-related bodies such as COPE, the ICMJE, and the CSE, even more so in journals that claim to follow these organizations' ethical guidelines.

Keywords: negative academic profile; responsibilities, reform, and role models; scholarly reputation; self-correcting science

Arguments in favor of excluding editors with multiple retractions or a history of misconduct

In a recent opinion paper, in reaction to a visibly increasing trend in retractions of papers in scholarly and unscholarly journals (Oransky, 2022), it was proposed that editors and editors-in-chief

(EICs) with multiple retractions or a history of misconduct should be proactively excluded from the editorial boards of journals (Teixeira da Silva, 2022). Four of the core theses or arguments that were put forward in that paper were: 1) given their privileged position that is based on trust by the academic community in such individuals, editors and EICs not only need to be suitably qualified and free of biases (Tennant & Ross-Hellauer, 2020), but also need to have a "clean" academic and scholarly record, i.e., untainted by a history of misconduct, as can be reflected by multiple retractions (Grey et al., 2020) or an excessive amount of papers with scientific errors (Bhatt, 2021); 2) the continued inclusion of such individuals would lower the level of trust in that journal (and by association, the publisher), and it would negatively impact respect, ultimately causing damage to the journal and pub-

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lisher's reputation and brand image; 3) retractions in themselves can be stigmatizing and can cause peripheral career damage and reputational harm to individuals and institutions who are listed on retracted papers (Azoulay et al., 2015), so their use as an exclusionary measure needs to be carefully and cautiously assessed; 4) the suggestion is not set in stone, and reformative justice and education may be long-term processes to assist and guide editors and EICs who may have strayed from expected ethical and moral norms.

The use of the Retraction Watch database (RWD) (RWD, 2022) has become, as can be appreciated from a Google Scholar search, increasingly prominent in the world of retractions and in the bibliometric assessment of individuals, groups, institutes, and countries associated with them. As an example, according to the RWD, Yoshihiro Sato and Jun Iwamoto have –as of 18 June 2023– 150 and 108 retractions and other notices (e.g., expressions of concern), respectively, placing them into the top ranks of the Retraction Watch Leaderboard (RWL) (RWL, 2022). While this paper does not aim to debate the merits and/or demerits of either the RWD or RWL, two examples are shown of how they are being used in select ways to profile and/or select and/or differentiate academics in real-case situations. In the first example, Bolland et al. (2022) argued against the citation of work by Sato and Iwamoto, claiming that their papers' findings are unreliable. Separately, the RWD was used by Clarivate, which manages the journal impact factor, to exclude individuals from its Highly Cited Researcher ranks (Clarivate, 2022; Retraction Watch, 2022). These two examples suggest that the RWD and RWL, to a lesser (or less formal) extent, are being used by academic and scholarly communities in debates and situations related to publishing ethics, including the link between retractions, accountability, and their consequences, as well as in more formal policy-making.

In the light of these situations and arguments, as well as documented practical uses of RWD and RWL, this paper aimed to go beyond the theoretical arguments put forth in Teixeira da Silva (2022) to explore whether editors or EICs with a record of committing misconduct at any level (e.g., fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism), or who violated

any stated codes of conduct or ethics guidelines, as evidenced by retractions indexed in the RWD, and listing on RWL, currently serve on the editor board(s) of one or more journals.

Prior to that applied assessment, a brief presentation of epistemic mechanisms of trust and integrity within academic publishing is provided.

The information processing mechanisms involving epistemic integrity in academic publishing

Academic publishing is, in essence, the transmission and diffusion of knowledge within the infosphere of human society, even if it is not necessarily society's objective to produce academic knowledge (Facer, 2020). In the processes of information reception and interpretation, trust acts as a "guard" for the information channel from the external environment into the mind, determining the level of scrutiny on the perceived values of the new information (Vuong, 2023). Editors who are the authors of retracted papers are attached to certain values of trust (here: negative values – distrust) that represent the degree of resistance others will have upon receiving and interpreting information being produced or filtered by them. Consequently, those journals that employ these editors and the content of papers published in them are also associated with a lower level of trust compared to their baseline values (here: reputation and prestige – prioritized information channels) (Schiavo, 2022). Knowledge, in the form of academic publications, is evaluated through subjective cost-benefit judgments, employing referencing information, including the sources of inputs and related prior filtering processes. In this case, an editor with a record of multiple retracted papers will be considered an attached negative perceived value in such evaluations, consequently affecting the net perceived value of the involved article being evaluated. In science, including its information exchanging pathway – scientific publishing, we should carefully consider the precautionary principle. While it is true that more research is needed on this matter, we simply cannot wait until the problem causes clearly visible widespread damage before taking action.

Cases of authors with multiple retractions on editor boards

In order to try and offer an initial practical perspective on this theme, the RWL was screened at the end of 2022 to identify high-profile cases. In each case, names were searched in Google together with the following keywords: “editor”, “editor-in-chief”, and “editor board”. Although initial screening was performed throughout the better part of 2022, final assessments and compilations were made between September 28 and October 3, 2022.

A total of six individuals on the RWL were found to be associated, at the end of 2022, with an editorial board of a journal (Table 1). Even though several of these individuals were or may have been associated with editor boards prior to 2022, those positions and journals were not considered because the aim of this paper was to appreciate the association between 2022 retraction volumes and corresponding temporal editorial positions. At that time, the number of retractions by these authors ranged between 27 and 42. The author with the most editorial positions identified in this list was Bharat B. Aggarwal (13).

While this paper only presents a limited number of cases, it is worth noting that retractions are only the visible part of the iceberg of academic misconduct. And even if we only consider these six typical cases, their implicit impacts on public trust and perception-shaping within the scientific community are already not negligible, to say the least. In this situation, common sense can speak louder than discovered evidence. We believe that it would be too late if the publishing system were to allow the diffusion of distrust within the scientific community and evolve into new and uncontrolled coping mechanisms.

Wider-ranging impacts of editors and EICs with a retraction-rich record

The conflicts of interest (COIs) that might arise from the simultaneous support by an editor of a journal via their inclusion on the editorial boards of multiple journals, or an EIC who might have this supreme position in several journals, might not be

immediately evident, but in times of crisis or scandal, such as an editor who has engaged in misconduct, or who might have multiple retractions (and/or expressions of concern), then these COIs become extremely important and pertinent to the topic of editorial accountability (Teixeira da Silva, 2021). For example, it can be argued that an editor (or EIC) who does not declare on their public editorial board profile that they serve on the editorial board of several other journals, including journals that are intellectual competitors or publishers that are financial competitors, may be employing a lack of open and transparent declarations, an action that might constitute a form of hidden COIs.

This paper focused on six individuals who are publicly profiled on the RWL, and with between 27 and 42 retractions, according to the RWD, and who were, in 2022, serving on the editorial boards of multiple journals and publishers (Table 1).

It has been advised that a *curriculum vitae* should declare all editorial positions, retractions, and other elements of an individual’s scholarly career (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2020). While completing the assessment of cases for this paper, as one example, it was observed (at the end of 2022) that the publicly visible 240-page curriculum vitae of José Luis Calvo-Guirado, who appears at number 20 on the RWL, failed to indicate any of his 32 retractions (Calvo-Guirado, 2022). What signal does this send to Calvo-Guirado’s peers and the wider academic community? The ethical issue of competing editorial positions becomes clearer when one observes some of the cases in Table 1, especially individuals who serve on the editorial boards of journals that are COPE members and who are also on the boards of some journals whose academic and scholarly quality may be suspect.

The ultimate message is if editors and EICs with multiple retractions to their names and with a history and record of misconduct are rewarded with editorial positions, even more so if those journals are COPE member journals, then one signal that is sent is that it is acceptable to assume a leadership position despite failed leadership, or absent the qualities that define a competent and ethical leader (Sharma et al., 2019). If this happens, then how can the leadership be held accountable?

Limitations and notes of caution

Supplementing an earlier paper that argued that editors or as EICs with multiple retractions or a history of misconduct should not serve on the editorial boards of scholarly journals (Teixeira da Silva, 2022), this paper examines real-case examples using six individuals that appear in both the RWD and the RWL, and the reputational risk that exists for journals and publishers that continue to employ, voluntarily or paid, such individuals as editors or EICs. The risk is even more acute when such individuals occupy editorial positions in journals that are part of an ethics brand, such as COPE, but also in journals that have more suspicious scholarly conduct, such as those in the OMICS brand (Manley, 2019). However, there are extremely high risks of accusations of slander, public humiliation, and/or unscholarly conduct caused by “person-shaming”, or the claimed association with predatory journals (Ruiter-Lopez et al., 2019), so the use of such information needs to be carefully considered and weighed before use, possibly as a form of exposome for science reformation (Canali, 2022). Even more so because—when the volume of retractions continues to rise, resulting from incidences of fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism of evidence—this has spurred the intensified study and quantification of such incidences (Zuckerman, 2020). Ultimately, a journal’s choice to maintain individuals with multiple retractions on their editorial boards is their individual choice, although academia should have the freedom to discuss the issue openly, given that information and editors tend to widely spread across the Internet and given that the RWD and the RWL are currently open and public resources. Even though an “Open Editors” tool claims to hold information about 590,000+ editors in 26 publishers’ journals (Nishikawa-Pacher et al., 2022), a search for the first academic in Table 1, Bharat B. Aggarwal, yielded zero results. Similarly, no positive results were found for the remaining five individuals listed in Table 1. Consequently, despite the advantages of web-scraping, a manual approach to searching, using Google, seems to be the most effective still until a better technique is devised.

While an editor’s retraction record does not fully and correctly represent that person’s morality and current mindset, it is worth noting that in the current overloaded academic infosphere, most scientists do not have the time and energy to carefully check the “smaller” details of other individuals. They likely do not know whether the editors with retractions have redeemed their past misdeeds or how serious those misdeeds were. Rather, most people within the scientific community and the public tend to rely on the available statistics at hand to make quick judgments. It often comes down to the simple duality of “good” and “bad”. Thus, editors being the authors of multiple retracted papers would be widely seen in a negative light regardless of their specific individual records. To lessen the negative effects following this inductive pattern, clear and open retraction notices can help increase the availability and accessibility of this needed information for increasing the accuracy in creating public perceptions of authors of retracted papers (Vuong, 2020).

Finally, it needs to be emphasized that while a person can have a change of heart, who will monitor and evaluate this reformative process? And who will provide the resources, human power, and supervision for such activities? Restorative justice is morally right, but will it be practically right in the current resource-limited academic landscape?

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest relevant to this topic.

Authors’ contributions

The authors contributed equally to the intellectual discussion underlying this paper, literature exploration, writing, reviews, interpretation and editing.

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Table 1 Examples of authors with multiple retractions, but who currently occupy editorial positions¹ in academic journals

Name ²	Number of retractions ³	Journal / Publisher (URL)	Position	Journal or publisher a COPE member? ⁴
Bharat B. Aggarwal	30	Vaccines / MDPI (https://www.mdpi.com/journal/vaccines/editors)	Editorial Board Member	Yes
		Advances in Traditional Medicine / Springer Nature (https://www.springer.com/journal/13596/editors)	Advisory Editor	Yes
		Journal of Advanced Pharmaceutical Technology & Research / Wolters Kluwer (https://www.japtr.org/editorialboard.asp)	Editorial Board Member	Yes
		International Journal of Inflammation, Cancer and Integrative Therapy / OMICS Group (https://www.omicsonline.org/editor-profile/Bharat_Aggarwal/)	Executive Editor	No
		Journal of Blood Disorders and Medicine / SciForschen (https://www.sciforschenonline.org/journals/blood-disorders-medicine/editorial-board.php ; https://www.sciforschenonline.org/editor-board/blood-disorders/bharat-b-aggarwal/biography.php) ⁵	Editorial Board Member	No
		Journal of Scientific Research of the Banaras Hindu University / Institute of Science, Banaras Hindu University (https://www.bhu.ac.in/research_pub/jsr/Editorial%20Board.html)	Editorial Advisory Board Member	No
		Journal of Advanced Pharmacy Education & Research / SPER Publications and Solutions Pvt. Ltd. (https://japer.in/journal-page/editorial-board)	Editorial Board Member	No
		Journal of Pharmaceutical and BioSciences / SPER Publications and Solutions Pvt. Ltd. (http://www.jpbs-online.com/editorial_board.aspx)	Editorial Board Member	No
		Archives of Clinical Gastroenterology / Peertechz (https://www.peertechzpublications.com/journals/archives-of-clinical-gastroenterology/editorial-board)	Editorial Board Member	No
		Annals of Food Processing and Preservation / SciMed Central (https://www.jscimedcentral.com/FoodProcessing/editors.php)	Editorial Board Member	No
		AIMS Bioengineering / AIMS Press ⁷ (https://www.aimspress.com/aimsboa/news/solo-detail/EditorialBoard ; https://www.aimspress.com/aimsboa/article/6314/special-articles)	Editorial Board Member	No
		Internet Journal of Medical Update / A K S Publication (https://www.akspublication.com/EditorialBoard.htm)	Editorial Board Member	No
		Indian Journal of Agriculture and Allied Sciences / Banaras Hindu University (?) (http://www.ijaas.org.in/editors.html)	Guest Editor	No
José Luis Calvo Guirado	32	Indian Journal of Dental Sciences / Wolters Kluwer (http://www.ijds.in/editorialboard.asp)	International Editorial Board Member	Yes
		Dentistry and Oral Research / Innovation Info (https://www.innovationinfo.org/journal/editorial_board_member/Dr-JOS-LUIS-CALVO-GUIRADO)	Editorial Board Member	No
		International Journal of Materials Research in Science and Technology / Helics Group (https://journalofmaterials.com/journal/editorial_board_member/Jose-Luis-Calvo-Guirado-/Universidad-Cat%C3%B3lica-San-Antonio-de-Murcia/190)	Editorial Board Member	No
		AIMS Bioengineering / AIMS Press ⁷ (https://www.aimspress.com/aimsboa/news/solo-detail/EditorialBoard ; https://www.aimspress.com/aimsboa/article/6314/special-articles)	Editorial Board Member; Guest Editor	No
		Journal of Osseointegration / Ariesdue (S.R.L.) (https://www.journalofosseointegration.eu/jo/board)	Board of Reviewers Member	No

		Symmetry / MDPI (https://www.mdpi.com/journal/symmetry/special_issues/Dental_Implant_Macrogeometry_Biomaterials)	Guest Editor / Special Issue Editor	Yes
		Journal of Biotechnology and Recent Advances / Madridge Publishers (https://madridge.org/journal-of-biotechnology-and-recent-advances/editors)	Editor	No
		Asploro Journal of Biomedical and Clinical Case Reports / Asploro Pvt. Ltd. (https://asploro.com/editorial-panel-asjbccr/)	Editorial Panel Member	No
		Acta Scientific Dental Sciences / Acta Scientific (https://actascientific.com/ASDS-EB.php)	Advisory Board Member	No
Victor Grech	29	Malta Medical Journal / Unclear (https://www.mmsjournals.org/index.php/mmj/editorial-board)	Editor board member	No
Antonio Orlandi	34	Electronics / MDPI (https://www.mdpi.com/journal/electronics/editors)	Editor	Yes
Shahaboddin Sham- shirband	42	Annals of Emerging Technologies in Computing / IAER (http://www.aetic.theiaer.org/editors.htm)	Editor board member	No
		IAES International Journal of Artificial Intelligence / IAES (https://ijai.iaescore.com/index.php/IJAI/about/editorialTeam)	Associate Editor	No
		International Journal of Advanced Science and Technology / SERSS (http://sersec.org/journals/index.php/IJAST/about/editorialTeam)	Editor board member	No
		Informatics Engineering / AIRCC Publishing Corporation (https://airccse.org/journal/iejie/editorial.html ; https://airccse.org/editorial.html)	Editor board member	No
		International Journal of Soft Computing, Mathematics and Control / Wireilla Scientific Publications (https://wireilla.com/ns/math/editors.html)	Editor board member	No
		American Journal of Engineering Science and Technology Research / Unclear (http://www.ajestr.com/Editor%20Board.php)	Editor	No
		International Journal of Computer Science and Business Informatics / Unclear (https://ijcsbi.org/ijcsbi/index.php/ijcsbi/about/editorialTeam)	Editor	No
Prashant K. Sharma ⁶	27	International Journal of NanoScience and Nanotechnology / Research India Publications (https://www.ripublication.com/irph/editorial_board_of_ijnn.htm)	Editor board member	No

¹ There is always the possibility that an individual may have been listed on an editorial board without their knowledge or explicit permission, but these possibilities are not considered, merely the appearance on an editorial board; the list of journals' editorial boards on which these individuals appear might not be exhaustive

² Listed alphabetically by family name

³ According to the Retraction Watch database

⁴ As verified against the COPE member lists: <https://publicationethics.org/members>

⁵ The biography states that "Dr. Aggarwal is currently a member of the editorial boards of 24 international journals". However, since it is unclear when this profile was published, it is unclear whether "current" is, in fact, current.

⁶ The author's ORCID account (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5283-0901>), last updated on June 2, 2022, indicates that "He is also working as Associate Editor/Member of Editorial Board of various peer-reviewed international journals", but no titles or details are provided.

⁷ Overlapping editorial boards in two individuals' profiles.