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Paper retractions begin reawakening press skepticism about science

The academic publisher Springer announces that 64 papers are being pulled from 10 journals.

• By Steven T. Corneliusen

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Science and the Media:

Paper retractions begin reawakening press skepticism about science

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An 18 August press release from Springer, the academic publisher that boasts of having “more than 200 Nobel Prize winners among the authors of [its] books and journal articles,” has begun renewing press attention to the issue of science’s credibility. The release begins:

Springer confirms that 64 articles are being retracted from 10 Springer subscription journals, after editorial checks spotted fake email addresses, and subsequent internal investigations uncovered fabricated peer review reports. After a thorough investigation we have strong reason to believe that the peer review process on these 64 articles was compromised. We reported this to the Committee on Publishing Ethics (COPE) immediately.

At the blog Retraction Watch, the resulting posting begins: “This is officially becoming a trend.” The blog quotes an unnamed Springer official: “We have further strengthened our the checks in our editorial offices as a result of this. We are working to support our external editors to make them aware of the issues and ensure that thorough checks of peer reviewers are completed.” The blog also quotes the official explaining that the papers’ authors may not have been involved in every case:

Findings suggest some third party agencies, offering pre-submission editing and submission

assistance services to authors, may have been involved during the submission process. In situations where institutional investigations have found that authors have been inadvertently affected by the compromised peer review process, they will be encouraged to resubmit and go through a legitimate peer review process.

Within hours of Springer's announcement, reports from only two news sources came up in a search at Google News. But each is well situated to stimulate widened press attention at a time when questions have been being asked in the media about science.

The Scientist, merely reporting, posted a piece called "Another mass retraction," which begins by reporting that the discovery stemmed from "the hunch of an editor who noticed irregularities in the reviewers suggested by submitting authors." But the *Washington Post* opens its report, headlined "Major publisher retracts 64 scientific papers in fake peer review outbreak," with the trumpets of an exposé:

Made-up identities assigned to fake e-mail addresses. Real identities stolen for fraudulent reviews. Study authors who write glowing reviews of their own research, then pass them off as an independent report.

These are the tactics of peer review manipulators, an apparently growing problem in the world of academic publishing.

Peer review is supposed to be the pride of the rigorous academic publishing process. Journals get every paper reviewed and approved by experts in the field, ensuring that problematic research doesn't make it to print.

But increasingly journals are finding out that those supposedly authoritative checks are being rigged.

Steven T. Corneliussen, a media analyst for the American Institute of Physics, monitors three national newspapers, the weeklies Nature and Science, and occasionally other publications. He has published op-eds in the Washington Post and other newspapers, has written for NASA's history program, and is a science writer at a particle-accelerator laboratory.
