

Viewpoint

Received: 3 Oct 2022
Accepted: 5 Nov 2022
Published: 21 Dec 2022

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Funding statement

No funding was received for this study.

Should editors with multiple retractions or a record of academic misconduct serve on journal editorial boards?

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Citation

Teixeira da Silva JA. Should editors with multiple retractions or a record of academic misconduct serve on journal editorial boards? *Eur Sci Ed.* 2022;48:e95926.

<https://doi.org/10.3897/ese.2022.e95926>

Abstract

In the academic world, despite their corrective nature, there is still a negative stigma attached to retractions, even more so if they are based on ethical infractions. Editors-in-chief and editors are role models in academic and scholarly communities. Thus, if they have multiple retractions or a record of academic misconduct, this viewpoint argues that they should not serve on journals' editorial boards. The exception is where such individuals have displayed a clear path of scholarly reform. Policy and guidance is needed by organizations such as the Committee on Publication Ethics.

Keywords:

Academic image, corrective science, reform, responsibilities, role models, scholarly community

Retractions, academic misconduct, and scholarly publishing

In general, academic papers that have been found after publication to violate an established code of ethics should be retracted, by and large invalidating their findings and continued use.¹ The number of retractions continues to rise² caused by increasing incidences of fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism of evidence.³ This has spurred the study and quantification of such incidences.⁴ This is also stirring debate among academics, including authors and editors, not widely observed a decade or more ago. Ultimately, wider debate implies greater scrutiny, and if this results in greater integrity, then the process is welcome and should be considered positive.

The centrality of journal editors in journals' socio-ethical value systems

In the world of academic publishing, those who are in positions of great responsibility, power, and status are most affected by public scrutiny. Editors and editors-in-chief (EICs) carry multiple responsibilities, academic and moral, and as leaders in their academic communities, they themselves need to uphold the highest possible standards of ethical behaviour, as equally as they hold the behaviour and scholarly conduct of their author base accountable.⁵ The complexities of the roles, positions, and responsibilities of editors and EICs are amplified by several values that they are expected to have, such as honesty, promptness, competence, dependability, fairness, accountability, and integrity.⁶ The Committee on Publication Ethics provides a wide range of attributes and responsibilities that are associated with editors.⁷

Retractions: Socio-academic stigma and reputational impact

When a paper is retracted, negative stigmatization is associated not only with the act of retraction but also with the way in which it may be portrayed in the public domain, such as on blogs and social media, and within the academic community.⁸ People who are associated with retractions, that is, those who have accrued retractions to their name, as well as their associates such as research collaborators, may feel stress caused by public and peer scrutiny because retractions remain a part of their permanent publishing record. Retractions should also be included in their curriculum vitae.⁹ This is not altogether a negative aspect if, as a result, attitudes and habits are reformed. For example, if the literature is effectively corrected as a result of retractions, thereby becoming more scientifically valid or robust, then this is a positive step for science and its integrity.¹⁰ Moreover, where possible, those who take proactive steps to correct the literature, despite the negative stigma, deserve praise. Little research on the sociological aspects of this field of study appears to have been conducted.

This viewpoint discusses whether editors or EICs who have committed misconduct at any level, such as fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism, that leads to the retraction of a published paper, or who violated any stated codes of conduct or ethics guidelines, should remain on the editor boards of journals.

Arguments for removing editors with ethical infractions

Given the special and highly privileged position that editors or EICs occupy, essentially serving as the ethical and moral face of the journal and their scholarly community, when they have accrued multiple retractions that are associated with misconduct (and not genuine mistakes), then they should voluntarily step down from such a position. The rationale behind this argument is that such individuals bring disrepute to the journals and members of the associated editorial board(s). Editors with retractions proven to be the result of a deliberate act of misconduct should step down to protect the image and academic record of the journal and, by association, the publisher.

Some editors may have one or two or a few retractions that do not necessarily reflect unethical behaviour. In such cases, punitive measures are unfair. Here, it is imperative that the background information surrounding retractions, primarily via retraction notices, be complete and informative¹¹ to allow for a fair appreciation and balanced judgement of the editor before making any decision regarding the removal from an editor board or before applying reformative measures. Applying FAIR principles (findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable)¹² to the Retraction Watch Database, to create an 'editormetrics' database,¹³ would allow journal managers, policymakers, and publishers to run a background check on an individual before electing them to an editorial board.

To better appreciate how an editor or EIC could be removed from a journal's editorial board, it is important to appreciate briefly how editors are appointed to such positions. In the case of society-run or publisher-managed journals, either the senior management or the senior editors are typically responsible for inviting new editors, who may or may not be remunerated. In some cases, the EIC may be responsible for inviting editorial board members. To my knowledge, editors are not voted in by the journal's current editorial board. The process by which an editor or EIC with misconduct-based retractions or ethical infractions is removed from an editorial board needs to be fair, and their voice and arguments should be heard and weighed before a decision is made. If an editor is considered unfit to continue in their position, and they are not willing to resign voluntarily, they should be removed by the publisher or society that owns the journal. These procedures should be open, public, and transparent for maximum accountability to maintain a journal's reputation. If an editor with multiple retracted papers is deemed to be eligible to continue to serve, I recommend that, where possible, a public statement, such as an editorial, defending the continued service of such an individual as an EIC or editor, should be published. Editors often hold positions on the editorial boards of multiple journals. Clear processes are required so that if an editor is removed from the editorial board of one journal for misconduct, other journals with which that editor is associated will be able to assess whether they should make the same decision.

Removing an editor or EIC because they have several retractions may be perceived as punitive if the individual feels that they are still positive contributors to the academic community or have skills that would benefit the journal and publisher, despite their retraction-tainted record. The personal and professional sensitivities of such individuals should still be appreciated because they too are human.¹⁴ Rather, such an action should be seen as reformatory, namely to improve the scholarly standing and ethical image of the journal and publisher and to set a positive example to associated authors, peers, and other editors.

Can or should there be exceptions to the rule? The notion of reformatory justice

The theoretical basis of reformatory justice and reformatory education is that punitive measures, such as in response to academic dishonesty, can be reversed.¹⁵ In other words, despite having multiple retractions to their name or having violated ethical codes of conduct, at least in theory, under highly supervised conditions and guidance, it may be permissible to allow such individuals to continue to perform academically as editors. For example, an editor or EIC could be given the opportunity to show and prove, within a predetermined amount of time, that they have taken pro-active measures to improve the integrity of their own work and research. In the light of positive reforms, and with the unanimous support of the journal's society or publisher, such individuals could resume their editorial positions and responsibilities. Such actions and cases would set a positive example for other researchers and peers.

Conceptualizing an academic world that coexists with retractions

Given the increase in post-publication scrutiny in recent years,¹⁶ it is no longer possible to guarantee the 'published' status of all papers. Because editors and EICs are themselves research scholars, there is no guarantee that their publication record will remain pristine and untouched by retractions. It is thus important for scholars, ethicists, and policymakers to see retractions as a natural (but undesirable) element of the publishing landscape. The suggestion made in this paper takes academia one step closer to holding those in positions of academic power and responsibility more accountable, removing that privilege when it is undeserved.

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