



The Invasion of Paper Mills

The worsening phenomenon of research paper mills and predatory journals in academic publishing, warning of their impact on academic integrity and the quality of scientific research, and holding scientific institutions responsible for closing the loopholes that permit phantom publishing and the exploitation of public funds.

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Sabina Alam, former Director of Publishing Ethics and Integrity at Taylor & Francis, has noted that approximately 50% of suspected cases of research integrity violations are attributable to paper mills — operations that produce and sell academic authorship slots on fabricated scientific papers. In 2020, with the backing of major global publishers including BMJ, Elsevier, Frontiers, IOP Publishing, the JAMA Network, Sage Publishing, Taylor & Francis, Wiley, and Springer Nature, the International Association of Scientific, Technical and Medical Publishers (STM) launched an initiative to develop tools capable of detecting paper-mill-generated articles — a direct response to a phenomenon

that has grown alarmingly pervasive across the scientific journal landscape.

In May 2023, Hindawi — an imprint of Wiley — retracted more than 1,200 scientific articles due to serious failures in peer review integrity, failures that had allowed certain journals to be heavily infiltrated by fraudulent paper-mill submissions. Separately, the Chinese Academy of Sciences published an annual warning list of compromised journals, which notably included *IEEE Access* and *Energies*, the latter published by MDPI. Publication opportunities in prestigious scientific journals remain constrained, with acceptance rates typically ranging between 10% and 15%. This reality places enormous

pressure on researchers and academics whose career advancement, professional promotion, and access to future research funding are all contingent on the volume of their published output.

One response to this pressure was the emergence of open-access journals, which provided publishing platforms for researchers — particularly early-career scholars or those seeking broader citation reach. Open-access publishing was, in principle, a sound idea: it offered a means of relieving pressure on researchers and expanding the dissemination of research without prohibitive costs. Yet the thriving landscape of open-access publishing gave rise, on its darker side, to counterfeit journals — known variously as predatory, deceptive, fraudulent, cloned, or fake journals.

These are journals that, in most cases, subject submitted articles to no genuine peer review whatsoever; when revisions are requested, they tend to be trivial or purely cosmetic. In essence, such journals exist for one primary purpose: to extract publication fees from

authors. The decision to publish in these deceptive outlets — driven by the pursuit of the fastest possible route to a publication record, at the expense of quality and originality — is, metaphorically speaking, a pact with the devil: the sale of the author's integrity and scholarly honesty in exchange for a hollow publication credit.

At this juncture, we must pause the scene and address the scientific institution directly: the philosophy by which an institution defines and delimits its role in upholding the quality of education and scientific research is of paramount importance — for the institution is the primary party responsible for permitting this negative trajectory and this form of academic corruption. It is the institution that bears first responsibility for enabling phantom publishing, which in turn facilitates the misappropriation of public funds — a consequence of weak regulations, the exploitation of procedural loopholes, inadequate oversight and follow-through, and the absence or insufficiency of a robust promotions review system.

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