

Actions and criteria of researchers and editors regarding cloned journals

Acciones y criterios de investigadores y editores sobre revistas clonadas

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Cloned or hijacked journals are those that imitate the format, name, identifier, and sometimes the content of legitimate academic journals. Their main objective is to attract researchers seeking to publish their work, often taking advantage of their desire to have publications to advance their careers. These journals are characterized by the lack of a rigorous review process, the rapid acceptance of articles without adequate critical analysis, and the request for disproportionate publication fees.

It should be noted that this phenomenon has grown exponentially in recent decades, driven, in part, by the pressure that researchers feel to publish and the need to comply with the evaluation criteria at their institutions.⁽¹⁾ In Latin America and the Caribbean, there have been radical changes in the scientific policies of some nations such as Peru and Ecuador.⁽²⁾ These changes have manifested themselves in three main ways:



- 1) The receipt by journals of countless proposals from these countries
- 2) The trafficking of authorship or plagiarism by gift authors⁽³⁾
- 3) The distribution of institutional funds to cover the costs of article processing charges (APC).

As a result, a large amount of scientific output has been generated (regardless of its quality) and the first choice for authors is to publish it in journals that operate under the APC model. This is based on the belief that monetary mediation is an influential criterion in the acceptance of a manuscript for publication. This perception is not unfounded; in recent years, journals under the APC model have published more articles in less time, and the reviews are usually less in-depth.⁽⁴⁾ In this ecosystem, cloned journals have evolved, offering streamlined editorial processes, cursory reviews, and rapid publication – everything a researcher needs today. Added to this is the charging of high APC fees, which, although not everyone can afford, many authors consider necessary to maintain their positions and projects. Publishing articles in such journals leads to the dissemination of erroneous or low-quality content, undermining trust in science and research. Studies published in these fraudulent journals are often lost to authors, who may not be aware of the deceptive practices of these platforms. Editors also face significant challenges. Questions arise such as:

- Could these articles "published" with the ISSN affect journal metrics?
- How can authors be helped to identify these types of scams?
- What is the procedure to eliminate these illicit sites?

The above questions were faced by the Mexican journal *Tecnología y Ciencias del Agua*, indexed in Scopus, which detected the creation of a fraudulent website, which used its identity and included its design and ISSN. This site, created in WordPress, began to "publish" content under the name of the journal, which has generated concern among its editors. The situation was reported by a reader who noticed a new URL, which led to



an investigation and confirmation of the fraud. It is important to note that the journal is registered with INDAUTOR in Mexico, and both its logo and that of the editor are protected.⁽⁵⁾

To combat the problem of cloned journals, it is essential that both academic institutions and researchers take proactive measures. One of the most effective strategies is education and awareness about how to identify legitimate journals, as well as differentiate between quality journals and those that are fraudulent. Scholars should familiarize themselves with recognized databases, especially those that display specific indexing sources. In these cases, it is important to check that the journal websites match those listed in the databases. It is also necessary to consult lists of predatory and fraudulent journals published by organizations such as Beall's List.⁽⁶⁾

However, to identify hijacked or cloned journals, it is necessary to check whether the digital object identifiers correspond to those officially granted by recognized publishers. This identifier is legitimate when it reflects the authority of the publisher; any discrepancy may be an indication that the journal is not authentic. In addition, it is useful to investigate the background of the journal, for which tools such as the Retraction Watch Hijacked Journal Checker should be used.⁽⁷⁾ This platform allows you to detect whether the journal has previously been flagged for integrity issues, such as hijacking of publications or unethical practices.

The quality of the journal's website should also be reviewed. A site that presents grammatical errors, inconsistencies in information or an unprofessional design can be a warning sign. Commonly, cloned journals request articles directly from authors through commercial or unreliable email domains.

When an editor identifies that his journal has been cloned, he must take immediate action to protect his work. First, a cease and desist letter should be sent to the person responsible for the website where the clone appears, warning of possible legal action. Likewise, it is appropriate to demand the removal of any content that infringes copyright or trademarks. If these actions are not effective, legal action can be considered, filing a lawsuit for unfair competition and copyright infringement. This last



option is effective when those responsible are identified, something that in these cases generally does not happen.

Legal protection of journals is a fundamental aspect to safeguard the integrity of their content and reputation. It must be ensured that the rights of the journal, as well as those of each of its articles, are duly registered and protected. This prevents any type of plagiarism or abuse by third parties who might try to appropriate the ideas or research published.

Another crucial step in this process is the registration of the trademark in the name of the entity that owns the journal, which must be carried out at the corresponding industrial property institute in each country. This registration establishes the identity and value of said journal in the market. In addition, it is vitally important to register the title in the name of the entity that owns it, in such a way as to protect it as an intellectual asset and ensure that no other publication can use an identical or similar name.⁽⁸⁾

Throughout this process, it is essential to collect and retain all relevant evidence indicating the existence of the cloned journal and its correspondence to the original publication. It is important to inform the hosting provider of the cloner, which can be done through the information available in Whois. It is also necessary to notify search engines such as Google, Bing and Yahoo to remove the cloned site from their search results and to file a complaint with the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). Likewise, the journal's social networks, such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Bluesky, should be used to inform the public and alert about active accounts of the clone (duplicate or ghost journal). It is advisable to write to the databases that index the journal to ensure that they do not link to the fraudulent site. Likewise, a communication should be sent to authors, reviewers and readers, explaining the situation and clarifying which is the legitimate site of the journal. Finally, it is advisable to publish a notice both on the official website and on social media to keep the academic community informed about the problem.



Duplicate or cloned journals represent a growing problem in academia that requires immediate attention. Their existence not only affects the quality of scientific research, but also undermines trust in the publishing system. Through education, awareness, and the creation of responsible publishing policies, the academic community can work to mitigate the impact of these journals and protect the integrity of research.

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