Persona y Bioética
ISSN: 0123-3122
bioetica@unisabana.edu.co
Universidad de La Sabana
Colombia

Teixeira da Silva, Jaime A.
ON THE ABUSE OF ONLINE SUBMISSION SYSTEMS, FAKE PEER REVIEWS AND EDITOR-CREATED ACCOUNTS
Persona y Bioética, vol. 20, núm. 2, 2016, pp. 151-158
Universidad de La Sabana
Cundinamarca, Colombia

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=83248831003

On the Abuse of Online Submission Systems, Fake Peer Reviews and Editor-Created Accounts

Sobre el abuso de sistemas de presentación en línea, falsos comentarios de pares y cuentas creadas por el editor

Sobre abuso de sistemas de apresentação on-line, falsos comentários de pares e contas criadas pelo editor

Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva[1]

Abstract

Many journals and publishers employ online submission systems (OSSs) to process manuscripts. In some cases, one "template" format exists, but it is then molded slightly to suit the specific needs of each journal, a decision made by the editor-in-chief or editors. In the past few years, there has been an increase in the number of cases in which OSSs have been abused, mostly by the authorship, either through the creation of fake identities or the use of false e-mail accounts. Although the abusive or fraudulent authors are at fault in such cases, the fact that such cases remained undetected for so long is of concern. Moreover, the current OSSs are imperfect, have security issues and may not be able to detect false information, except through post-submission verification. Sting operations, which involve the submission of false manuscripts with false identities and false affiliations, are no less unethical, and those who abuse the publishing protocol deserve to be as reprimanded as those who abuse OSSs. Finally, I question the ethics of editors or publishers creating OSS accounts on behalf of reviewers prior to obtaining their explicit permission.

Keywords: Author and editor abuse; editorial responsibility; ethics; online submission system (Source: DeCS, Bireme).

DOI: 10.5294/PEBI.2016.20.2.3

PARA CITAR ESTE ARTÍCULO / TO REFERENCE THIS ARTICLE / PARA CITAR ESTE ARTIGO

Teixeira da Silva, J.A. On the Abuse of Online Submission Systems, Fake Peer Reviews and Editor-Created Accounts. pers.bioét. 2016;20(2): pp. 151-158. DOI: 10.5294/pebi.2016.20.2.3

FECHA DE RECEPCIÓN: 2015-05-09
FECHA DE ENVÍO A PARES: 2015-07-07
FECHA DE APROBACIÓN POR PARES: 2016-03-04
FECHA DE ACEPTACIÓN: 2016-03-04

1 PhD. Independent Researcher Kagawa-ken. Miki-cho, Japan. jaimetex@yahoo.com

Resúmen

Muchas revistas y editores emplean sistemas de envío en línea (OSS, por su sigla en inglés) para el procesamiento de manuscritos. En algunos casos, existe un formato único de "plantilla", que luego se moldea ligeramente para adaptarse a las necesidades específicas de cada revista, según la decisión tomada por el editor en jefe o los editores. En los últimos años ha habido un aumento en el número de casos en que los OSS han sido abusados, principalmente por la autoría, ya sea mediante la creación de falsas identidades o el uso de cuentas de correo electrónico falsas. Aunque los autores abusivos o fraudulentos son culpables en tales casos, el hecho de que estos no hayan sido detectados durante tanto tiempo es motivo de preocupación. Además, los OSS actuales son imperfectos, tienen problemas de seguridad y pueden no ser capaces de detectar información falsa, excepto a través de la verificación posterior a la presentación del manuscrito. Las operaciones de relámpago, que implican la presentación de manuscritos falsos con falsas identidades y falsas afiliaciones, no son menos éticas, y quienes abusan del protocolo de publicación merecen ser tan amonestados como aquellos que abusan de los OSS. Finalmente, el autor del artículo cuestiona la ética de los editores o editores que crean cuentas OSS en nombre de los revisores, antes de obtener su permiso explícito.

Palabras clave: abuso por parte del autor y editor; responsabilidad editorial; ética; sistema de presentación en línea (Fuente: DeCS, Bireme).

Resumo

Muitas revistas e editores empregam sistemas de envio on-line (OSS, por sua sigla em inglês) para o processamento de manuscritos. Em alguns casos, há um formulário único de "modelo", que logo é adaptado superficialmente para as necessidades de cada revista, segundo a decisão tomada pelo editor-chefe ou pelos editores. Nos últimos anos, tem ocorrido um aumento no número de casos em que se tem abusado dos OSS, principalmente pela autoria, seja mediante a criação de falsas identidades, seja pelo uso de contas de e-mail falsas. Embora os autores abusadores ou fraudulentos sejam culpados nesses casos, o fato de que isso não tenha sido detectado durante tanto tempo é motivo de preocupação. Além disso, os OSS atuais são imperfeitos, têm problemas de segurança e podem não ser capazes de detectar informação falsa, exceto por meio da conferência posterior à apresentação do manuscrito. As operações relâmpago, que implicam a apresentação de textos falsos com falsas identidades e afiliações não são menos éticas, e os que abusam do protocolo de publicação merecem ser tão punidos quanto aqueles que abusam dos OSS. Finalmente, o autor deste artigo questiona a ética dos editores ou dos editores que criam contas OSS em nome dos pares avaliadores antes de obter sua autorização explícita.

Palavras-chave: abuso do autor ou editor, responsabilidade editorial, ética, sistema de apresentação on-line (Fonte: DeCS, Bireme).

ABUSE OF ONLINE SUBMISSION SYSTEMS

One of the most serious and recent reasons for retractions pertains to the abuse of online submission systems (OSSs). OSSs exist, in fact, to facilitate the management of manuscripts, authors, peers and editors by journals and publishers. In theory, the system is based on the assumption that it will not be abused. Yet, some high profile cases of some main-stream science, technology and medicine (STM) publishers (Informa Health, SAGE, Landes Bioscience, Elsevier, Wolters Kluwer, BioMed Central / SpringerNature), exemplified in more detail below, indicate that OSSs are not only highly fallible, but also apparently easily subject to abuse. Some of the ways in which the system can be abused are through the creation of false accounts, using either false names or aliases, false e-mails or emails that do not reflect those of the actual authors or the use of false identities to feign peer status and, thus, manipulate the result of the peer review for a favorable outcome. These would be the most obvious cases of abuse of OSSs to derive academic advantage over competing authors.

Alarm bells initially began to ring in 2012 in the plant academic community when it was learned that a South Korean researcher, Hyung-In Moon (Department of Medicinal Biotechnology, College of Nature Resources and Life Science, Dongguk University, Busan), had created fake e-mail addresses to complete his own favorable "peer" reviews and, thus, favor the publication of his papers (1). This led to at least 35 retractions, all in Informa Health journals (*Journal of Enzyme Inhibition and Medicinal Chemistry*, *Pharmaceutical Biology*, *International Journal of Food Sciences and Nutrition*, *Enzyme Inhibition and Medicinal Chemistry*, *Immunopharmacology and Immunotoxicology*) (2,3). The Editor in Chief of *Immunopharmacology and Immunotoxicology*, Prof. Emilio Jirillo, subsequently resigned (4). That case had been preceded by a case of abuse of Elsevier's OSS, Elsevier Editorial System (EES), by a Chinese researcher (Guang-Zhi He, Guiyang College of Traditional Chinese Medicine) who had "fabricated information during the review process to obtain a favorable review" in *Experimental Parasitology* (5,6). Prior to that case, China had come under the spotlight when researchers at Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Hubei created, among other fraudulent actions, a fake email address for one of the authors. It was meant specifically to be "used by the authors to intercept any information that would be sent to the corresponding author," thus gaining a favorable and unfair advantage for a paper submitted to *Cancer Biology & Therapy*, published by now-defunct Landes Bioscience (7).

SAGE, a UK-based publisher, became a victim of major author abuse of its OSS in 2014, retracting 60 papers from volumes 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20 of the *Journal of Vibration and Control* (8,9) after its OSS, SAGE Track powered by ScholarOne Manuscripts™, was abused by one author, Peter Chen, formerly of the National Pingtung University of Education, Taiwan. In this case, covered more extensively at Retraction Watch (10), not only had assumed and fabricated identities been used to manipulate the OSS, using as many as 130 fake e-mail addresses, so too was this burst of self-reviewed and self-approved manuscripts used to manipulate the author's own citations; i.e., the establishment of a citation ring. In addition to the retraction of these 60 papers, the then Minister of Education of Taiwan, Wei-ling Chiang, and one of the authors of several of those papers, resigned, as did Peter Chen (11).

Elsevier once again tasted the bitterness of author-based submission abuse when Khalid Zaman, of COMSATS Information Technology Center in Abbottabad, Pakistan, abused EES to submit his own faked peer reviews for three journals: *Economic Modelling*, *Renewable Energy*, and *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews*, resulting in 16 retractions (12).

Wolters Kluwer's *Medicine* became the next victim of abusive Chinese scientists from the Third Military Medical University, who created a fictitious account and submitted a review "under the name of a known scientist without his/her knowledge," leading to the retraction of two papers (13).

In another twist emerging from the use of fake e-mail addresses or OSS accounts to complete fake peer reviews, 43 papers were retracted from BioMed Central (BMC) (i.e., at that time Springer Science + Business Medium, now SpringerNature), following the use of third-party companies that sell such services (14). In addition, BMC temporarily shut down the author-suggested reviewer option of the OSSs of their 250+ journal fleet. Even though 43 papers were officially reported, entering the term "because the peer-review process was inappropriately influenced and compromised" into BMC's search function reveals 86 items, while "The Publisher and Editor regretfully retract this article" reveals 83 items, suggesting the number of retracted papers related to the abuse of the OSS may have exceeded the original tally advertised.

There are several loop-holes in the OSSs of publishers, including in the security functions of ScholarOne, allowing OSSs to be abused (15). In part, the request by journals for authors to suggest potential reviewers is, in itself, open to bias and abuse, even though it is ultimately the authors who must assume collective responsibility for those individuals they have suggested as peers. There are also serious concerns that third party companies might be selling such services, including fake peer reviews, false e-mail accounts and other services that fraudulently help authors to increase their chances of having a paper published, as appears to be taking place in China (16). These cases further accentuate the weaknesses of the traditional publishing system used by many publishers (17). This paper covers cases reported by Retraction Watch until March 2015, and newer cases will be covered separately elsewhere.

NEW AND NUANCED ABUSES OF ONLINE SUBMISSION SYSTEMS

Even though the Bohannon "sting" (18), in which Bohannon submitted dozens of open access journals to unsuspecting journals, proved that peer review in many of them was lax, or even non-existent, accepting nonsensical manuscripts, there were some underlying ethical abuses of that sting: a) false names and e-mail addresses were used; b) false institutional addresses were created in real countries; c) false declarations of originality were made upon submission; d) guarantees that all information was accurate were false and misleading; and e) false e-mails using false dialogue were used to mislead journal editors. Even though, ultimately, the "sting" proved what was already known about the predatory operations of many open access journals, and even though it helped to widely spread consciousness among academics, the Bohannon sting was deeply entrenched in lack of publishing ethics, with wide-spread abuses of OSSs. What remains unclear is why such widespread lack of publishing ethics protocol has not merited the retraction of that paper (19).

There is one more issue that is not being discussed or criticized anywhere, not in the literature, nor on blogs; namely, the forced creation of accounts on OSSs by editors or publishers, without the explicit permission of the individual(s) for whom an account has been created. There is no doubt that such a topic will elicit a wide range of responses, from the "this is a non-issue" to the other end of the opinion spectrum, at which concern is raised about the lack of ethics or protocol in the creation of such OSS-based accounts. Appendix 1 shows two examples of journals that created OSS accounts on my behalf during April 2015. This is a phenomenon that has happened to me about a dozen times, but only two recent examples are highlighted, since complaints to the same publishers regarding the previous unapproved creation of OSS accounts fell on deaf ears. The core question here is: should editors and publishers create accounts on behalf of authors? In most cases, such accounts are created to establish a platform on which the invitee then proceeds with the peer review of a manuscript he/she has been invited to review. The principle, in itself, is acceptable, but the order of events is not. An editor or publisher has the responsibility of first inviting an author to a peer review, indicating that to do so they will need to create an OSS account. Secondly, explicit permission must be obtained from that individual to create that account. Once formal approval has been obtained, both to review a manuscript and to create an OSS account, the publisher is then welcome to create it. Once such an OSS account has been created, then all subsequent invitations to peer review can be automatic. The current problem, as exemplified in Appendix 1, is that no permission is sought before an OSS account is created. As I see it, this is both unethical and a breach of privacy. Such over-reach by editors is, in addition to the instances indicated above, contributing to a gradual corruption of the submission process and, thus, to the erosion of trust in the peer review system overall.

ARE THERE ANY REALISTIC SOLUTIONS?

I propose three simple, yet practical and most likely effective solutions, if implemented:

a. Sting publications must end. There cannot be a dichotomy of publishing ethics, allowing some to use unethical means to achieve success, or show a point (e.g., Bohannon (18)), while the remainder of the scientific base has to conform to another set of publishing ethics. There are more examples of stings in (20,21).

b. Editors and journals/publishers must not request authors to recommend peer reviewers. This task must be the exclusive responsibility of the editorial board.

c. Editors and publishers should be allowed to create an OSS account only following explicit approval from the invitee.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares the research for this paper was conducted in the absence of any commercial, financial or other relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

1. Retraction Watch (2012a). South Korean plant compound researcher faked email addresses so he could review his own studies. http://retractionwatch.com/2012/08/24/korean-plant-compound-researcher-faked-email-addresses-so-he-could-review-his-own-studies/ (Last accessed, August 26, 2016).

2. Retraction Watch (2012b). 20 more retractions for scientist who made up email addresses so he could review his own papers. http://retractionwatch.com/2012/08/30/20-more-retractions-for-scientist-who-made-up-email-addresses-so-he-could-review-his-own-papers/ (Last accessed, August 26, 2016).

3. Retraction Watch (2012c).Retraction count grows to 35 for scientist who faked emails to do his own peer review. http://retractionwatch.com/2012/09/17/retraction-count-for-scientist-who-faked-emails-to-do-his-own-peer-review-grows-to-35/ (Last accessed, August 26, 2016).

4. Retraction Watch (2012d). Journal editor resigned in wake of retractions for fake email addresses that enabled self-peer review. http://retractionwatch.com/2012/08/31/journal-editor-resigned-in-wake-of-retractions-for-fake-email-addresses-for-self-peer-review/ (Last accessed, August 26, 2016).

5. Retraction Watch (2012e). Elsevier parasitology journal retracts paper after finding author made up peer reviewer email addresses. http://retractionwatch.com/2012/07/11/parasitology-journal-retracts-paper-after-author-found-to-have-made-up-data-during-peer-review/ (Last accessed, August 26, 2016).

6. Retraction Watch (2012f). More shoes drop for Chinese author who made up peer reviewer addresses. http://retractionwatch.com/2012/08/28/more-shoes-drop-for-chinese-author-who-made-up-peer-reviewer-addresses/ (Last accessed, August 26, 2016).

7. Retraction Watch (2010). Best of Retractions Part III: Whatever can go wrong … http://retractionwatch.com/2010/11/22/best-of-retractions-part-iii-whatever-can-go-wrong/ (Last accessed, August 26, 2016).

8. SAGE (2014a.) http://www.uk.sagepub.com/aboutus/press/2014/jul/7.htm (Last accessed, August 26, 2016).

9. SAGE (2014b). http://jvc. sagepub.com/content/20/10/1601.abstract (Last accessed, August 26, 2016).

10. Retraction Watch (2014a). SAGE Publications busts "peer review and citation ring," 60 papers retracted. http://retractionwatch.com/2014/07/08/sage-publications-busts-peer-review-and-citation-ring-60-papers-retracted/ (Last accessed, August 26, 2016).

11. Retraction Watch (2014b). Taiwan's education minister resigns in wake of SAGE peer review scandal. http://retractionwatch.com/2014/07/14/taiwans-education-minister-resigns-in-wake-of-sage-peer-review-scandal/ (Last accessed, August 26, 2016).

12. Retraction Watch (2014c). Elsevier retracting 16 papers for faked peer review. http://retractionwatch.com/2014/12/19/elsevier-retracting-16-papers-faked-peer-review/ (Last accessed, August 26, 2016).

13. Retraction Watch (2015a). Fake peer review fells two more papers. http://retractionwatch.com/2015/01/02/fake-peer-review-fells-yet-another-paper/ (Last accessed, August 26, 2016).

14. Retraction Watch (2015b). BioMed Central retracting 43 papers for fake peer review. http://retractionwatch.com/2015/03/26/biomed-central-retracting-43-papers-for-fake-peer-review/ (Last accessed, August 26, 2016).

15. Ferguson C, Marcus A, Oransky I. Publishing: The peer-review scam. Nature. 2014; 515: 480–482. DOI: 10.1038/515480a.

16. COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics). COPE statement on inappropriate manipulation of peer review processes. 2014. http://publicationethics.org/news/cope-statement-inappropriate-manipulation-peer-review-processes (Last accessed, August 26, 2016).

17. Teixeira da Silva JA, Dobránszki J. Problems with traditional science publishing and finding a wider niche for post-publication peer review. Accountability in Research: Policies and Quality Assurance 2015; 22(1): 22-40. doi: 10.1080/08989621.2014.899909

18. Bohannon J. Who's afraid of peer review? Science. 2013; 342(6154), 60-65. DOI: 10.1126/science.342.6154.60

19. Teixeira da Silva JA, Al-Khatib A. Questioning the ethics of John Bohannon's hoaxes and stings in the context of science publishing. KOME 2016; 4(1), 84-88. DOI: 10.17646/KOME.2016.16.

20. Carafoli E. Scientific misconduct: the dark side of science. Rendiconti Lincei 2015; 26(3), 369-382. DOI: 10.1007/s12210-015-0415-4

21. Al-Khatib A, Teixeira da Silva JA. Stings, hoaxes and irony breach the trust inherent in scientific publishing. Publishing Research Quarterly 2016; 32(3), 208-219. DOI: 10.1007/s12109-016-9473-4.

APPENDIX 1

Actual creation of OSS accounts by publishers in April 2015, without my explicit permission, or approval. All personal or identifying details (e-mails, account passwords, etc.) have been redacted.

Case 1 (Elsevier) April 1, 2015

"Dear [redacted],
You have received this system-generated message because you have been registered by an Editor for the Elsevier Editorial System (EES) – the online submission and peer review tracking system for Biotechnology Reports.

Here is your temporary username and confidential password, which you will need for accessing EES the first time at http://ees.elsevier.com/btre/

Your username is: [redacted]
Your password is: [redacted]

The first time you log into this new account, you will be guided through the process of creating a consolidated 'parent' profile to which you can link all your EES accounts.

If you have already created a consolidated profile, please use the temporary username and password above to log into this site. You will then be guided through an easy process to add this new account to your existing consolidated profile.

Once you have logged in, you can always view or change your password and other personal information by selecting the "change details" option on the menu bar at the top of the page. Here you can also opt-out for marketing e-mails, in case you do not wish to receive news, promotions and special offers about our products and services.

TECHNICAL TIPS:

1) Please ensure that your e-mail server allows receipt of e-mails from the domain "elsevier.com"; otherwise you may not receive vital e-mails.
2) We would strongly advise that you download the latest version of Acrobat Reader, which is available free at: http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html
3) For first-time users of Elsevier Editorial System, detailed instructions and tutorials for Authors and for Reviewers are available at: http://help.elsevier.com/app/answers/list/p/7923

Kind regards,
Elsevier Editorial System
Biotechnology Reports"

Case 2

On Thursday, April 16, 2015 1:02 PM, Science Technology and Development [redacted] wrote:

"Dear Dr. Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva,
It is a great pleasure for me to inform you that recently I have joined Pakistan Council for Science and Technology (PCST) as Chairman (www.pcst.org.pk).

As Chairman, I am also the Editor in Chief of Science, Technology and Development (STD) journal publishes by the PCST, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Now a days, Science, Technology and Development invites high quality research/review articles for publication

in the coming issues. The journal covering all areas of the biological, physical, chemical, and social sciences.

Dr. Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva, I would like to personally invite you to submit your valuable research work to Science, Technology and Development. Please use the following information to submit your article via online submission system.

User Name: [redacted]
Password: [redacted]

Online Submission System: http://std.amscentral.com

Please visit www.std.com.pk for further information about the journal.

Your positive response would be highly appreciated.

Regard
Dr. Anwar ul Hassan Gilani
Pride of Performance, Sitara-i-Imitaz
Chairman
Pakistan Council for Science and Technology
Shahrah-e-Jamhuriat
Sector G-5/2, Islamabad, Pakistan"

Case 3 (Anais da Academia Brasileira de Ciências, Scielo)
"26-Mar-2015

Dear [redacted]:

Welcome to the Anais da Academia Brasileira de Ciências, the official Journal of the Academia Brasileira de Ciências (Brazilian Academy of Sciences), published since 1929. We use the ScholarOne Manuscripts site for online manuscript submission and review. Your name has been added to our reviewer database in the hopes that you will be available to review manuscripts for the Journal which fall within your area of expertise.

Your USER ID for your account is as follows:

SITE URL: https://mc04.manuscriptcentral.com/aabc-scielo
USER ID: [redacted]
PASSWORD: To set your password please click the link below. Clicking the link will take you directly to the option for setting your permanent password.

https://mc04.manuscriptcentral.com/aabc-scielo? [redacted]

When you log in for the first time, you will be asked to complete your full postal address, telephone, and fax number. You will also be asked to select a number of keywords describing your particular area(s) of expertise.

Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,
Admin AABC
Anais da Academia Brasileira de Ciências Editorial Office"