

Faulty scientific paper has damaged all sides

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Friday analysis: faulty scientific paper has damage

04 September 2020



Professor James Kirkpatrick

So, a peer-reviewed scientific paper, written by Professor Jar Kirkpatrick, Suyanti Winoto-Lewin and Jenny Sanger from the University of Tasmania's Discipline of Geography and Spatial Sciences, has been retracted from the MDPI journal *Fire*. The journal has apologized to its readers. Source: Bruce Mitchell

What does that mean to have an academic peer-reviewed paper retracted by the publisher?

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In academic publishing, the goal of peer review is to assess quality of articles submitted for publication in a scholarly journal. Before an article is deemed appropriate to be published in a peer-reviewed journal, it must undergo the following process:

- The author of the article must submit it to the journal editor, who then forwards the article to experts in the field. Because they specialize in the same scholarly area as the author, they are considered the author's peers (hence "peer review").
- These impartial reviewers are charged with carefully evaluating the quality of the submitted manuscript.
- The peer reviewers check the manuscript for accuracy and the validity of the research methodology and procedure.
- If appropriate, they suggest revisions. If they find the article lacking in scholarly validity and rigor, they reject it.

Because a peer-reviewed journal will not publish articles that do not meet the standards established for a given discipline, peer-reviewed articles that are accepted for publication exemplify the best practices in a field.

When a retraction is applied to academic or scholarly publication, it indicates that an article was withdrawn from the publication after it appeared. A retraction is issued through a decision made by the publication's editorial board.

In a major paper on the subject published by the London School of Economics, Quan-Hoang Vuong – the Director of Centre for Interdisciplinary Social Research at Phenikaa University, Hanoi – said that "no editorial practice in academia can affect an author's reputation as much as a retraction".

"The stigma is rooted in the fear of every researcher that a retracted article ... is like a scar seared into the public profile of an author who wrote it."

It is quite rightly pointed out that while withdrawing papers that contain errors or misconduct, helps to keep the literature honest, researchers, want to avoid retractions at all costs.

Quan-Hoang Vuong points out that retracted papers, no matter how undesirable they are, poke right at the heart of scholarly publication.

Scientists are humans, and humans are fallible, he says.

“It is unavoidable that ... research has its limitations and may be retracted under certain circumstances,” he says.

“When a retraction happens, scientists and editors/publishers should cooperate to make the information as detailed and transparent as possible.”

But what of the damage that may be done should a paper – retracted – be used to mount an argument for a certain action by the entire industry?

And what of the damage when the retracted paper is used by academics involved as the basis of opinion pieces in major metropolitan and country newspapers to attack other contra peer-reviewed papers?

The Greens have used the now retracted paper as the basis of a campaign against the native timber industry.

And the paper did form part of the platform of an opinion article Professor Kirkpatrick published in *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* newspapers in May.

Following this Dr Zylstra and the other scientists, but not Professor Kirkpatrick, published a letter to the editor reiterating these concerns, which was widely published in Tasmanian and Victorian country newspapers.

In June, an article by Professor Kirkpatrick strongly attacked a peer-reviewed paper on the role of timber harvesting and fire led by Professor Attiwill, a retired Associate Professor from the School of Botany at Melbourne University.

The journal *Fire* has been applauded for its decisive and honest action, and Sanger and Winoto-Lewin condemned for their contrived research by a growing list of stakeholders.

This list includes the Institute of Foresters Australia, the Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources Senator Jonno Pascoe, the Tasmanian Minister for Natural Resources Guy Barnett and the Tasmanian Shadow Minister for Resources Shane Broad.

And Professor Attiwill. He, the Institute of Foresters Australia
Barnett, want an apology.

“I’ve never had that personal level of attack in public,” Prof /

He said that to find that attack was based on a now retracte
“deeply troubling”.

The silence has, so far, been negligible.

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