Tips for identifying and avoiding hijacked journals

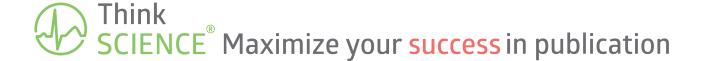Brian Sanford and Richard Bradly Harris

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From spam emails to Twitter (now X) bots impersonating politicians and celebrities, the Internet is rife with bad actors, and it is important to exercise a certain level of caution in our online interactions. The same is true in the academic publishing world as well. In some cases, journals may not always be what they appear. In this article, we offer some practical tips on how you can avoid publishing in "**highjacked**" journals (also known as "**cloned**" journals), where the identity of reputable journals is stolen so that authors are tricked into paying fees to publish in counterfeit journals.

Most people associate academic journals with characteristics such as authority, credibility, and integrity, and they would be correct in the large part. However, as we discussed in a previous article, various kinds of predatory journals are published by a group of bad actors whose aim is to exploit authors, by publishing their research papers for a fee but not offering the value that reputable journals provide and risking reputational damage for the named authors.

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What are hijacked journals?

As far back as March 2013, Declan Butler wrote a news article in *Nature* magazine outlining how "[c]on artists are stealing the identities of real journals to cheat scientists out of publishing fees." While this is not a new phenomenon, authors are still getting caught by these scams and publishing with these sham businesses that are pretending to be legitimate journals.

These so-called hijacked or cloned journals may mimic the name, logo, ISSN number, and even the look of the real journal's website in order to deceive authors and take their hard-earned research funds. Making matters worse, a strong financial incentive often encourages these journals to improve their search engine optimization (SEO) so that the hijacked journals appear higher than their legitimate counterparts in the results of search engines like Google.

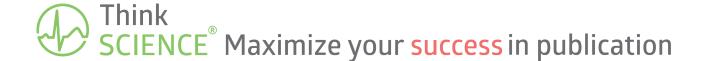So, how can we avoid accidentally publishing in a hijacked journal?

Red flags suggesting a hijacked journal

Fortunately, by being proactive and mindful of potential red flags, authors can avoid publishing in hijacked journals. In fact, many of the tips we've previously discussed for identifying predatory journals and predatory conferences should apply here as well. In 2019, Clarivate gave some specific examples of the hallmarks of hijacked journals, highlighting just how convincing they can be..

Here are some of the red flags of a highjacked journal.

- The journal solicits manuscripts from researchers by email, typically offering quick publication.
- The journal can be a regional journal, which would be less well known to a broader readership and makes it easier for authors to miss signs on the website that it has been hijacked.
- The journal does not have a high impact factor.
- The journal's website does not seem to be properly formatted or there are many grammatical mistakes and inconsistencies. However, more recently, wording errors can be "smoothed over" by using AI-powered language tools and so not be such an obvious red flag as it was in the past.
- The journal may not clearly show the fees required for publishing your work.
- The journal publishes articles of poor academic quality or with little or no connection to its purported field.

- The journal has multiple search results that show different URLs. See the aforementioned Clarivate article on hijacked journals for screenshots of Google search results for a journal that was hijacked, where the hijacked journal is higher in the results than the real journal.
- Peer review either does not occur or requires that only superficial changes be made before the manuscript is published, offering no real value to the authors.

On their own, any one of these may not be necessarily indicative of a hijacked journal. For example, many journals may solicit manuscripts by email, particularly reviews or submissions to special issues, and publication fees can vary widely. However, authors who find multiple red flags from the list above should take extra steps to double-check that they're submitting to the legitimate journal.

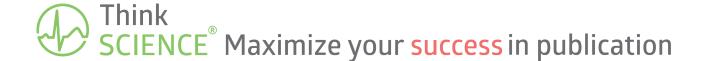## Tips for identifying and avoiding hijacked journals

Because the main concern of highjacked journals is to collect publications fees from authors, many journals tend to accept papers that have not undergone appropriate peer review or proper editing. Authors who publish their work in such journals risk damaging their reputation. Therefore, it is critical that you check that the journal you will entrust your manuscript to is legitimate and cares as much about their own reputation as you care about yours.

Fortunately, when considering whether to submit to a journal that you do not know well, there are some resources that you can use to help you check the legitimacy of a journal.

- Check whether the journal appears in the Highjacked Journal Checker, which is a list of journals that have been highjacked. The website Retraction Watch maintains the list (available as a Google doc).
- Check if the Directory of Open Access Journals includes the journal on its list of "Removed" journals that does not meet its standard practices (also available as a Google doc). Click the "Removed" tab" at the bottom of the document to access the list of removed journals and the reasons for their removal.
- Check that the journal does not have multiple red flags such as those listed in the section above or that characterize predatory journals in general.

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- Take note if the journal has different URLs listed when doing a website search of the journal name. Check to see if there are slight variations in the journal's name or URL in the search results, and don't assume that the highest listed search result will lead you to the real journal. As with phishing emails, look for discrepancies between the URLs shown and the actual destinations.
- Check with fellow researchers and colleagues about whether they have published in that specific journal before. If so, what was their experience like? Also, have you seen the journal's articles cited in other articles that you've read in your own field?
- Ask your librarian or research integrity officer any questions you may have about the legitimacy of a journal. Also, for example, Toho University Media Center has provided an online portal to check for highjacked/cloned journals (in Japanese).

Summary

We hope this article can help you and your colleagues avoid communicating with and publishing in a highjacked or cloned journal. While the red flags and tips here can help you identify and avoid them, there is of course no single foolproof solution. If you are not sure whether a particular journal has been hijacked (or is predatory in other ways), we'd be happy to help you check that you are choosing a legitimate journal.

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