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Retraction of *Predatory publishing in Scopus: evidence on cross-country differences* lacks justification

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As members of the Distinguished Reviewers Board of *Scientometrics* and/or as recipients of the Derek de Solla Price Medal, we wish to express our disagreement with the retraction of the paper “Predatory publishing in Scopus: evidence on cross-country differences” co-authored by Vít Macháček and Martin Srholec (Macháček & Srholec, 2021a). The retraction was discussed in the blog *Retraction Watch* (Oransky, 2021), where important information about the context of the retraction was disclosed, including the pressure exerted by the publisher Frontiers on *Scientometrics*.

The paper was retracted on 6 September 2021 (Macháček & Srholec, 2021b), about seven months after its publication. During that time some critical discussion on the paper had already been published in *Scientometrics* (Mills & Bell, 2021; Srholec & Macháček, 2021). We welcome this as an example of a healthy academic debate.

The retraction note (Macháček & Srholec, 2021b) states that “some of the findings are unreliable”, a conclusion that is based on “post-publication peer review”. As reasons for the retraction, the note mentions the lack of a “control group” and the restriction of the analysis “to publications in four languages”. The first reason is puzzling. The use of control groups in scientometric analyses is uncommon. Control groups are typically used in experimental studies. Most scientometric studies, including the one by Macháček and Srholec, are of an observational nature. Observational studies typically use control variables in regression analyses to control for confounding factors, and this approach was also taken by Macháček and Srholec. The second reason is factually incorrect. The analysis of Macháček and Srholec does not consider the language of publications. It considers the language of the countries in which authors are located.

The retraction note does not demonstrate the alleged unreliability of the paper by Macháček and Srholec and therefore does not provide a sound justification for the retraction. The pressure exerted by Frontiers on *Scientometrics* is deeply disturbing, and the process followed by *Scientometrics* to reach its decision to retract the paper lacks transparency. Questions raised by many of us have not been answered in a satisfactory manner, and the original material resulting from the post-publication peer review has never been shared, neither with the authors nor with us, making it difficult to understand the process that has led to the retraction.

We would like to express our support to Macháček and Srholec. We have no reason to doubt their integrity as researchers, and we feel uncomfortable about the way in which *Scientometrics* handled their work. Their paper should be part of the archive of scholarly knowledge, so that its merits can be openly debated. This should also offer room for critique, for instance from publishers such as Frontiers. Closing the debate by retracting the paper is highly problematic and poses a serious threat to academic freedom.

Finally, we acknowledge that editorial decision making can be challenging, and occasional mistakes are inevitable. To strengthen the journal, we hope the editorial team and the editorial board more broadly will have the opportunity to reflect on lessons that can be learned from the way in which the paper by Macháček and Srholec was handled.

Declarations

Conflict of interest Giovanni Abramo is Associate Editor of *Journal of Economic Surveys*. Isidro F. Aguillo has been Editor-in-Chief of *Cybermetrics Journal*. Dag W. Aksnes is Associate Editor of *Journal of Economic Surveys*. Zaida Chinchilla-Rodríguez is Editor-in-Chief of the Research Assessment section of *Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics*. Rodrigo Costas has collaborated with Macháček and Srholec. Ciriaco Andrea D’Angelo is Associate Editor of *Journal of Economic Surveys*. Vincent Larivière is Associate Editor of *Quantitative Science Studies*. Ben Martin is Editor of *Research Policy*. Nicolas Robinson-Garcia has col-

laborated with Macháček and Srholec, and is Associate Editor of *Scientometrics*. Torben Schubert has collaborated with Srholec, and is Advisory Editor of *Research Policy*. Mike Thelwall is Senior Associate Editor of *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*. Peter van den Besselaar is Associate Editor of *The Information Society*. Thed van Leeuwen is Co-Editor of *Research Evaluation* and Associate Editor of the Research Assessment section of *Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics*. Ludo Waltman has collaborated with Macháček, and is Editor-in-Chief of *Quantitative Science Studies*.

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