



Dopey Dupe Retractions: How Publisher Error Hurts Researchers

By Adam Etkin (Executive Editor, Springer Publishing Co; ORCID [0000-0002-4130-1745](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4130-1745)) and Ivan Oransky, MD (Vice President and Global Editorial Director, MedPage Today; ORCID [0000-0002-0746-9288](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0746-9288))

Imagine you're a researcher who is one of 10 candidates being considered for tenure, or a promotion, or perhaps a new job which would significantly advance your career. Now imagine that those making this decision eliminate you as a candidate without even an interview because your record shows you've had a paper retracted. But in this particular case, what the decision makers may not be aware of is that the paper was not retracted because you made an honest mistake—which, if you came forward about it, really shouldn't be a black mark anyway—or even because you did something unethical. It was retracted due to publisher error. Like Han Solo and/or Lando Calrissian, you'd find yourself in utter disbelief while saying "It's not my fault!"—and you'd be right.

Retraction Watch has reported on several "retractions" that were the result of publisher error. Usually this comes in the form of duplicate publication. Perhaps an unedited version was published due to an administrative miscommunication. Maybe a production glitch caused the same paper to appear in consecutive issues of the same journal. Possibly a journal was transferring the article to another journal produced by the same publishing house and inadvertently published it in both journals. Then there are a few cases in which a journal rejected an article, published it anyway, and then retracted it.

Granted, the percentage of retractions of this type that we know about is very small, but the

potential negative implications for the researcher are enormous. While the retraction notice may make it clear that the authors were not at fault, unfortunately the reality is that often these notices may not be read by those who need to see them, or by the time they're seen it's too late.

In any industry, even the best make mistakes. It happens and frequently no one is to blame. Nevertheless, those in STEM publishing can and should do better. There are complex problems we are all trying to solve and deal with, but this should not be one of them. The most frustrating aspect of this scenario is how obviously and easily it can be avoided: Simply don't call it a "retraction."

Call it a "publisher error," which is what it is. Or find something else to call it, preferably without using the word "retraction" or its weasel-word synonym, "withdrawal." Just don't say that the article has been "retracted."

It's silly really, that this is even something that needs to be addressed. The industry has adopted or created solutions to difficult problems such as plagiarism (iThenticate), article identification (Crossref DOIs), user disambiguation (ORCID), funding requirements (CHORUS), and more. Let's not create problems where there isn't one. Simply say it like it is. If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, don't call it a vulture. If you're a publisher who needs to remove a paper due to your own error, it's not a "retraction." Don't call it one.