



# The right to reject an unwanted citations: do we need it?

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## Dear *Scientometrics* Editors,

In a Letter to the Editors published in No 6/2021, Teixeira da Silva and Vuong (2021) open a discussion on “the right to refuse unwanted citations” (mainly in predatory or low-level journals or by ‘problematic’ authors). The basic idea behind their contribution is that *‘problematic citations can certainly harm a scientist’s reputation’*. However, the entire published letter to the editors does not provide any evidence for that assertion, nor do the authors show how the authors of the cited work might be harmed. On the contrary, it actually builds on the mindset that if publishers’ predatory practices or authors’ ‘problematic’ behaviour are bad, the victim must also be bad. In a healthy environment of evaluation of research, this is not possible. I consider it prudent to reject such a construction in its infancy. I see two main problems lying in the background of the paper by Teixeira da Silva and Vuong:

- Why should an author be responsible for citations by other authors?
- Who decides on the predatory or ‘problematic’ behaviour?

The large group for which an author should have the right to refuse to be cited are cases where the citation is by ‘problematic’ authors such fake authors or authors of the retracted paper or by authors that cite in ‘problematic’ way (e.g., misinterpretation). Anyone, not just the cited author, can point out ‘problems’ in published article to the editors of the journal concerned. Serious publishers have mechanisms for correcting, revising or retracting articles after publication. Justifying where a published article is wrong or inaccurate is more useful to the readers than information that the cited author “John Doe” does not wish to be cited in the published article. Therefore, it is not clear how ‘having the right not to be cited’ would help. Secondly, the retraction is a standard procedure in the scientific publication process and COPE provides clear guidance for this procedure (COPE Council, 2019). In many cases, the retraction is not evidence of unethical or ‘problematic’ behaviour.

If Teixeira da Silva and Vuong (2021) mentioned the deliberate omission of cited articles by rival scientists, should the reverse be mentioned, where rival scientists will deliberately reject citations from their opponents? The idea of the right not to be

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cited raises further questions for me. If authors should have the right not to be cited, shouldn't they also have the right to agree in advance to be cited? Won't we end up requiring the authors of the articles to document the consent of all cited authors?

The fight against predatory journals is gradually degenerating into a witch hunt, at least in some cases. Instead of evaluating a journal's content, the identification of predatory journals/publishers is based on descriptive criteria only. These criteria were originally intended to serve as a warning about possible collusion by publishers. The fact that these criteria do not always clearly identify abusive behaviour has been raised virtually throughout the time the subject has been discussed (e.g., Butler, 2013; de La Blanchardière et al., 2021). As Eriksson and Helgesson (2018) put it '*distinguish between journals that deceive scientists and journals that are just amateurish, annoying, or of low quality*'. But some researchers identify individual journals or publishers as predatory only on these criteria and determine how many 'predatory' journals are included in one of the indexing databases (e.g., Cortegiani et al., 2020; Manca et al., 2017). Other researcher studied how many citations were obtained by articles in such labelled journals (e.g., Akça & Akbulut, 2021; Frandsen, 2017; Oermann et al., 2019; Ross-White et al., 2019).

The existence of predatory journals is a problem for the entire scientific community, and there is a need to spread awareness of the risks of publishing in predatory journals. Still, is it necessary to have tabloid style headlines for editorials like '*Readers beware! Predatory journals are infiltrating citation databases*' (Severin & Low, 2019)? Publishing in predatory journals is described as misconduct by Moher et al. (2017), but should its articles therefore automatically be described as bad? The authors of the previous study themselves state that, although the overall level of articles in so-called predatory journals was poor, some studies met normal standards and were registered with the relevant authorities.

Some publishers' practices are unacceptable and have nothing to do with the dissemination of scientific knowledge, while other publishers operate in the so-called 'grey area' between acceptable and unacceptable publishing practices (Siler, 2020). The world is not black or white. A problem is the unclear definition of a publisher's 'predatory practices'. 43 experts from 10 countries agreed on the definition as follows: '*Predatory journals and publishers are entities that prioritize self-interest at the expense of scholarship and are characterized by false or misleading information, deviation from best editorial and publication practices, a lack of transparency, and/or the use of aggressive and indiscriminate solicitation practices*' (Grudniewicz et al., 2019). This definition perfectly captures the idea of predatory journals but provides no clear clues for the practical identification of predatory journals. Oddly enough, the essential characteristic of predatory behaviour, which is the publication of dubious articles of no or minimal scientific value, is expressed only indirectly as '*deviation from best editorial and publication practices*'. On the other side, even the largest publishers such as Elsevier could be classified as predatory according to this definition (Tennant, 2020). Before a general condemnation of predatory journals, the assessment of the quality of individual articles is lost. I consider this a fundamental violation of the integrity of research.

The author is to be criticised for the content of the work, not for where he publishes it (although he can influence it) and certainly not for who cites it (which he cannot influence in any way). This is likely to happen after we accept that an author should not be cited in a 'problematic' or predatory journals and should (actively) reject citations in such journals.

## Concluding note

Every scientist has the right to express his/her opinion and present his/her thoughts. But I find the idea that a scientist should have the right to reject a citation because it might be associated with a shoddy article or a citing author or a predatory publisher absurd. I admit that many ideas, though they may sound absurd or unlikely at the time of their presentation, can be pioneering and open a path that will take humanity further. In the case of the article by Teixeira da Silva and Vuong, I have my doubts. Even ideas, or just topics for discussion, are to be supported by strong arguments, which are lacking in the case of this article.

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