Hacked Peer Review Process: A Reiteration of the Elsevier Hack

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No one likes to receive a bad review on a submitted paper, since this may prevent publication. However, there are times when a good review can be even worse, ultimately causing a paper's retraction. How? This can occur when the peer review process is bogus. In such cases, someone hacked into the publisher's system and submitted a fraudulent review in the name of an actual professor who knows nothing of the case. Bizarre as it sounds, this process happened recently at Elsevier.

> About ten papers were affected and have been retracted from Elsevier journals.

Since there was no evidence of wrongdoing on the part of the authors, they will have the option of resubmitting the papers for legitimate reviews, and if the reviews are positive the research will officially re-enter the literature. Even in the best-case scenario, this incident is a blow to those involved and a speed bump in their careers.

> As of now this affair appears to be a typical case of mischievous hacking, not some scheme to sabotage professors' careers.

Several hackers may have been involved since the quality of the bogus reviews varied. Some were badly written, displaying no chemical insight and scant attention to Elsevier

guidelines. But some reviews were quite well written. However knowledgeable these hackers were, their true genius lay in writing positive reviews. Who is going to challenge a positive review? Not the authors. The editor might, but unless the fake review is markedly different from other legitimate reviews, it will likely pass across the editor's desk without comment.

Bogus Reviews: How to Avoid?

How can a researcher avoid being the victim of bogus reviews? One thing to do is check with the publication's review process to make sure it doesn't have any obvious security problems for submission of reviews. Elsevier's current system is probably a good model to compare others to, since Elsevier has now upgraded their review process to make it hard to hack.

What should a researcher do if he suspects he has been the victim of a bogus review? Obviously, speak out at once. That way, the solution of a problem comes before a retraction. What to look out for? A vague, generalized positive review would be one flag—a review that betrays no real understanding of the paper. If there were any suspicions it would seem to be a trivial matter for the editor to check the reviewer's email address against that listed the supposed respondent's university webpage. If the two addresses don't match up, there may be trouble afoot. In fact, this step seems so obvious that it can be done routinely. Maybe it should be!

How do you think the peer review process of such a reputed journal like Elsevier get hacked? Please share your thoughts with us in the comments section below.

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