

Report

Unfair Judgment against Iranian Scientists

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Introduction

During the last months, continuous reports published in groundbreaking journals, directly and indirectly, raise doubts about current Iranian scientific outputs.¹⁻⁴ No matter how Iranian authorities manage the story, it is highly recommended that the scientific community on national and international scales should have their own logic and independent ideas in similar cases. In this paper, we present a roadmap from the starting point to now; thus, readers of this paper can have the subtle judgment on this predictable scenario destroying endeavors by dedicated Iranian scientists. This roadmap is described below in different steps; meanwhile, our scientometric analysis will provide a better insight for this assessment.

First step

In September 2016, Science published a letter discussing a shady market in Tehran, Iran for writing theses and articles by companies.⁵ Richard Stone mentioned that the rapid growth in publication from Iran is a result of these illegal companies.

Reply

More than 45,000 scientific reports from Iran indexed annually in Scopus cannot be the result of companies' activities (Figure 1). Using journalistic tricks within applied photo in this report can be useful evidence, proving unethical purposes.

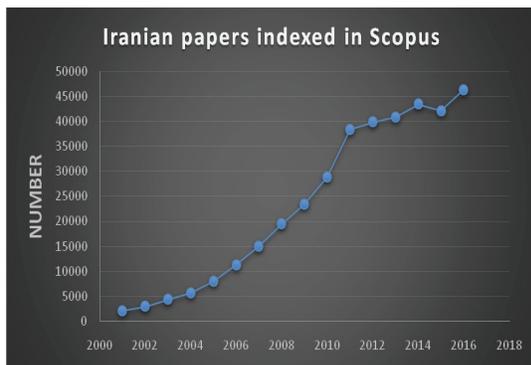


Figure 1. Increasing trend of papers published by Iranian scientists.

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Second step

Retraction watch was reported about doubtful papers from Iranian scientists who applied different unethical actions to publish their papers.⁶ In this survey, expert investigators discovered that seven journals from BMC and Springer published nearly 60 Iranian papers which lacked research integrity and contained fake results. The scenario continued in different angles by Science.

Third step

Following the retraction watch report, Nature News announced that 58 Iranian papers published by BMC and Springer were retracted due to different scientific frauds, including author manipulation, duplication and fake review process.⁷ In this report, Nature news declared that Iranian Scientists were involved in this scientific disgrace.

Reply

There are some interesting points about this report by the Nature News. The first is that Nature uses the word "Scientists" which carries a high meaning load for the readers. Indeed, is there any survey showing that all these 282 people involved are actual scientists? It is worth noting that our survey showed that more than 60% of these authors group are only graduate students who committed these unacceptable actions. Due to the common misspelling of Persian names, more than 30 names are repeated in the suggested list while they are actually the same person! Also, some of the people are with unknown affiliation or from abroad. Even many of the papers are handled by the same authors with no scientific background (High H-index or recent papers in high ranked journals). Now, the question is whether it is ethically authorized to name these authors as Iranian scientists? On the other hand, those seven journals which published these questionable papers should be the subject of question about publishing the papers which were first submitted by only three or fewer authors and then accepted with more than eight authors. This apparently unethical practice must be considered by the BMC and Springer publishers. Pleased or not, most of us acknowledge that fraud in publishing is increasing at an alarming rate.⁸⁻¹⁰ So far, there is no accurate global data of ongoing research misconducts but our short survey in the Web of Science (WOS) (keywords "retraction" and "retraction note") showed that more than 4218 papers have been retracted between 2008 and 2016.¹¹ Noted, in 2015, more than sixty papers were retracted similarly but Nature made no mention of those authors, universities or even countries involved.¹² The story became a scenario when we observe that in

Table 1. Comparison between Iranian and American retracted articles indexed in Web of Science (WOS) between 2010 and 2016.

Reasons of retraction	Plagiarism (falsification and duplication)	Relabeling & manipulating the Figure	Other unethical issues
79 Iranian papers	56 (71%)	6 (8%)	17 (21%)
291 American papers	74 (25%)	178 (61%)	39 (14%)

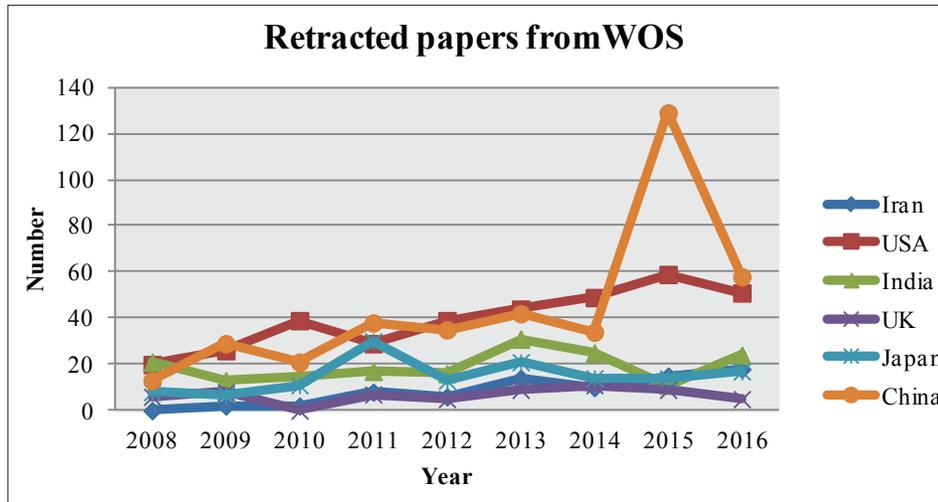


Figure 2. Trend of retraction papers indexed in WOS in last eight years.

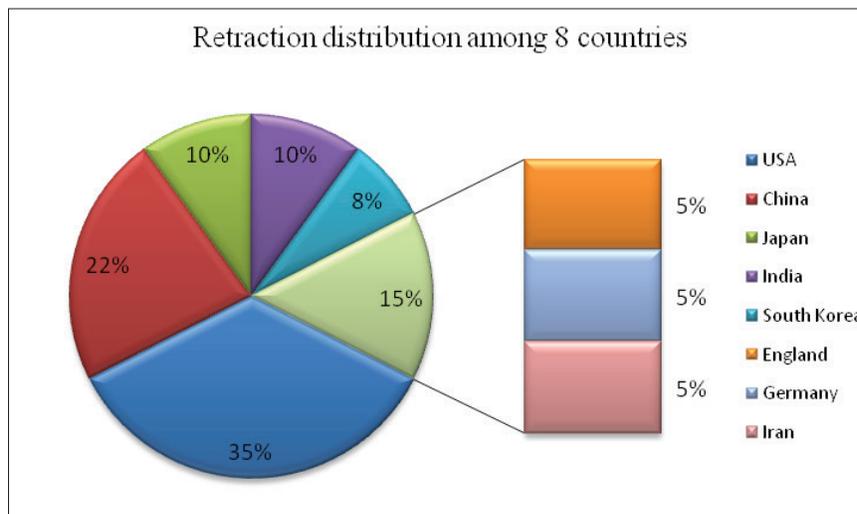


Figure 3. Distribution of retraction reports among eight countries with highest rates.

the case of Iranian authors, the reaction is quite different since not only the authors are disclosed but also the links for those papers are inserted in the main report.¹³

What should be inferred from this different reportage by Nature news? Our further literature search and analysis also showed that during this period, the number of scientific frauds by Iranian scientists (79 papers) was far less than those from the United States (468 papers), India (184 papers) and China (415 papers).^{14,15} A subtle analysis of retracted papers from Iran and the United States showed that the only different feature was the reasons for retractions. Plagiarism (defined as 70% multiplication from already published papers) was the most common reasons

for retractions from Iran ($P < 0.05$) whereas figure manipulation and other unethical issues were the most reported reasons for retraction from the United States ($P < 0.05$) (Table 1). In addition, we did not observe any significant increases in the number of retracted papers from Iran, Germany, UK and Japan during the last decade ($P > 0.05$) unlike the two countries i.e. China and the United States (Figure 2).

Moreover, in Figure 3, we showed that among eight countries with the highest rate of retraction, Iran is the lowest, and noted that the trend of retracted papers is not increasing, unlike the other countries.

Fourth step

The bad part of this scenario is that in the two papers published in *Science* clearly against Iranian scientists, ethical norms for the first time are introduced for Iranian scientists.^{1,3} In these papers, authors insisted on a new policy which advocates teaching ethics culture among Iranian scientists for preventing that kind of unethical publishing.¹ The main reason to call this story a scenario is that in the time of accepting those targeted papers against Iranian scientists, the author of the current paper submitted three contradictory papers to the *Science* and *Nature* which were all rejected immediately. What would be the best interpretation for this kind of behavior in publishing news from the scientists of a certain country? Is this anything other than smashing country-scientists using the ethical hammer? At last, ethics should not be applied as a smashing hammer against any population, especially without enough pieces of evidence. Journals like *Science* should always stand as an independent journal to direct the mainstream of science in the world. Unfortunately, global scientific misconducts have increasingly ringed the bell and it is time to find the best solution to halt this unacceptable flow. The first necessary step is that science stakeholders should not be harsh in their evaluations or state exaggerated opinion about received reports. There is no doubt that to keep pure science and ethics bound together in publications, adherence to ethical standards and norms should be promoted among all partners involved. For example, both journals and investigators must strictly bind to the ethical standards during the publishing process (writing the paper, peer review, stating the conflict of interest, etc.).

Ethics is not optional

In the above paragraph, we showed that ethics should be considered by journals and authors at any level of scientific activities. Ethics is not an optional concept, so referring to this necessity should be a general practice. Selective application of ethics can be the novel type of deviation in the dissemination of true ethical guidelines. Indeed, using ethics against a country by blindly blaming that country's scientists as individuals who may act unethically is a discouraging guide for newer journals.²⁻⁵ In the recent case, within three continuous papers in the last three months of 2016, Iranian scientists were blamed for running unethical actions in their publications. Apart from incorrect wording to call them Iranian scientists, the action sounds more political than scientific, especially considering the rapid increase in scientific products by Iranian scientists in the last decade (Figure 1).⁶ Regardless of how many similar reports come from developed countries which remain anonymous, this small part of retraction cannot absolutely serve as a detective factor to use the words "Iranian scientists". Therefore, this trend cannot serve as the dominant flow to disseminate ethics among scientific communities by *Science*. Therefore, we need to answer why this global problem exists despite a decade of endeavors to eliminate it. Here, we see how high ranking journal such as *Science* ignore the basic principles of ethics in their published papers about a certain country. In other words, excellent ethical standards on the

universal scale must be first provided by high-ranking journals such as world science stakeholders, and then it can be expected from national journals and authors to adhere to ethical norms in publishing. Decisions on manuscripts should be taken only based on scientific values rather than pursuing a questionable flow toward a certain population. To everyone's surprise, *Science* is pleased to consider only targeted reports submitted from countries such as Iran.

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The contents of this article are the sole responsibility of the author and consequently represent a personal perspective.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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