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Published in the Ghana

<http://kadint.net/our-journal.html>



ISSN 2410-4981

Articles

Walailak Journal of Science and Technology: A Potential Black Swan Event is Born

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Abstract

In early 2017, a manuscript was submitted to a special issue of Walailak Journal of Science and Technology (WJST), a free (platinum) open access (OA) journal published in Thailand. Prior to submission, WJST was checked for most obvious signs of predatory OA publishers and being covered by SCOPUS and listed at Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), it was determined to be a non-predatory OA journal. An editor-created account that entered incorrect data and without the implicit permission of the corresponding author raised an immediate red flag. WJST immediately corrected that error. After submission, the article was peer-reviewed, and the steps between editorial revision and final proof processing and publication were fairly quick, and professionally handled. No DOI was assigned. An unrelated article published in WJST with an apparent error in a figure was discovered. The authors of that paper were contacted about the query, and the journal and editors were copied. After a week of silence, the editor contacted the corresponding author (CA). After one more week, and with the threat of retraction by the editor-in-chief if no suitable explanation was provided, the CA responded. No explanation was provided for the figure irregularities, and it was discovered that the CA had submitted the paper without the knowledge of at least one of the authors, with whom he had not been in contact since 2004. In clear breach of the ethical and submission policies of the journal, WJST decided to swiftly retract the paper, the first-ever such retraction for WJST. WJST was caught by surprise and was very apologetic for editorial oversight. This case represents a rarely documented and witnessed birth of a potential black swan event – a highly unlikely or improbable event – in an OA journal. Future perspectives and cautious advice are provided.

Keywords: Editorial Responsibility, Open Access, Peer Review, Predatory, Quality Control, Thailand.

1. Introduction

The open-access movement is in turmoil

Traditional print journals are being gradually phased out. The trend in increasing open access journals (OAJs) began in the early 2000s and has reached fever pitch levels in the past decade with literally hundreds, if not thousands, of OAJs emerging annually, some academically valid, some not. A watchdog and US-based librarian, Jeffrey Beall, began a blog in 2008 that began to document, and blacklist, what he felt were academically suspect OAJs, the “predatory” OAJs,

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or POAJs. However, soon Beall became emboldened with and by his lists, encouraged by an empathetic global audience of concerned and irritated academics who wanted a blacklist of POAJs that infringed upon basic academic responsibilities and that were simply trying to draw profit for publishing papers instantly, without peer review. In the 3-4 years preceding the closure of his blog, Beall's influence increased, and he began to call for journal and institutional policy to be implemented based on his blacklists. However, not only were those blacklists imperfect, inaccurate, and biased (Teixeira da Silva, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a), entries on them could rarely be challenged. This led to an increase in the number of enemies, both within the OA movement and within traditional publishing, and a rift among academics as to the ethics of his often culture-shaming and potentially discriminative blacklists (Kimotho, 2019). Beall's blacklists suddenly disappeared on January 15, 2017, leaving POAJ supporters with a massive vacuum in the OA watchdog movement, and throwing the OA movement into some disarray, only because many in academia and the industry had relied heavily on Beall's blacklists as a "safe" and "accurate" source of information. Despite Beall's explanation and lamentation (Beall, 2017), the negative consequences of those blacklists remain, more than four years after their closure (Teixeira da Silva, 2020b).

In the past few years, in some ways to counter the ills caused by POAJs, the OA movement has also seen a cementing of three other important movements, open data, open science, and open peer review, which have the apparent objective of making the publishing process more open and transparent, increasing reproducibility (Wallach et al., 2018), and perhaps fixing some of OA and traditional publishing's ills. Many projects are being experimented on, and many experimental systems have been launched, some useful and successful, others not (Tennant et al., 2019). Academics have become veritable guinea pigs and experimental rats of the publishing industry, as all these experimental models are being widely applied to global academia. Not all is well with the OA movement, and even black OA or guerrilla OA seems to have become more successful, at least academically, than the green and gold OA models (Green, 2017), while the OA movement has become increasingly politicized and excessively commercialized (The Conversation).

In some ways, academics are on their own, left to their own devices to find suitable publishing outlets to better distinguish what is a true academic OAJ, and what is a POAJ, or the widening grey zone in between (Teixeira da Silva, 2020a, 2021a). Either that or they are fed a constant flow of "follow us" or "use our platform" marketing ploys. Given the increasing lack of definition as to what a POAJ is (Grudniewicz et al., 2019), academics have to have a greater sense of the risks in publishing, become more publishing-wise, and seek publishing venues and suitable journals that suit their needs, while calculating the risks (personal and professional) and assessing the benefits, including, very importantly, the safety of the journal, its academic validity and the costs of publication, all very real and important aspects that have to be taken into consideration before a target journal is selected (Teixeira da Silva, 2021b).

2. Results

The choice of Walailak Journal of Science and Technology as a target OAJ

While searching for a suitable journal, a few years ago, my co-authors and I (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2017b) wanted a choice that was free (most important aspect), since none of us receive research funding for this academic work, and if possible, OA, since the topic we wanted to discuss, namely predatory congresses, would be of importance, and value, to a global audience. Having experience with several mainstream publishers and journals that focus on publishing-, library- and information-related topics, and aware that peer review in some of these cases, including the submission-to-publication process, can take a year or more to complete, some thematically suitable journals were automatically excluded because of their famed tardy publication process. Indexing was important, and indexing on Scopus or Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) were attractive features. Eventually, we identified one Thailand-based OAJ, the Walailak Journal of Science and Technology (WJST), which is both listed on DOAJ (Figure 1A), even after its POAJ purges in 2014 (DOAJ, 2014), and also on Scopus, carrying a CiteScore (Figure 1B), an Elsevier/Scopus-owned metric that might be useful and competitive against the Clarivate Analytics' Journal Impact Factor (Teixeira da Silva, 2020c).

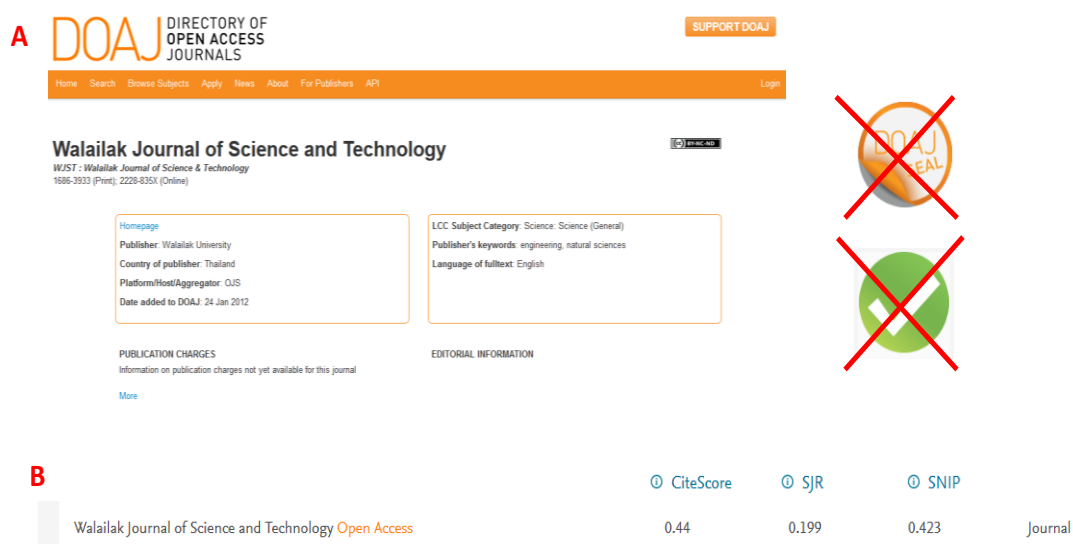


Fig. 1. The Walailak Journal of Science and Technology (WJST) is listed in DOAJ (A) and in Elsevier's Scopus (B)

Notes: In (A), WJST does not carry either of the two DOAJ symbols of "quality", the DOAJ seal, or the green tick. Sources: <https://doaj.org/toc/2228-835X> (A); <https://www.scopus.com/> (B; listed under "W"). Screenshots of any proprietary material used under academic fair-use (Teixeira da Silva, 2015d).

Even though fairly local, WJST had several of the aspects that we were looking for: no OA fees or article processing charges (i.e., platinum OA), publication in English, local but reaching a global audience through OA and its indexing. This decision was made, despite knowing the possible risks associated with the DOAJ (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2018). Moreover, the timing of our submission was perfect, for a special issue on "Communication and Information Technology". After completing a provisional screening of the WJST website for any possible glaring signs of predatory behavior, such as the lack of ethical guidelines, unclear instructions for authors, the lack of an editorial board or unclear location or contacts, and several other predatory behaviors or signs (Teixeira da Silva, 2013), we felt that this was a "safe" publishing venue. We also determined that even though WJST was considerably local, in terms of editorial responsibility, that it did not present any glaring predatory behavior. The Editor-in-Chief (EIC), Dr. Chitnarong Sirisathitkul of the Walailak University School of Science in Thailand was contacted with a presubmission query to ascertain if the topic that we wished to cover, namely predatory congresses and symposia, and ways to quantify that predation, would be of interest to the WJST editors and readership. The EIC was very receptive, kind, and helpful, responding within 24 hours, and offering to assist with the submission process, if necessary.

Editor-created submission account: First bump in the road for WJST

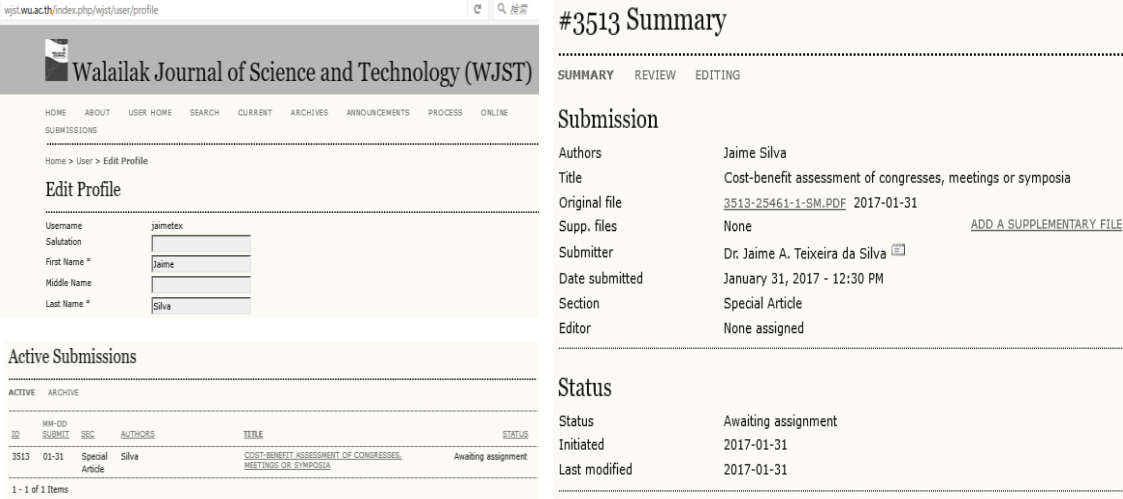
Perhaps too enthusiastically, the WJST EIC immediately created an online submission account on my behalf, without asking me first, and only informing me after the account had been created, indicating my user name and password, which WJST had set. This raised an immediate red flag because, if this was standard policy, then it might constitute predatory behavior (Teixeira da Silva, 2016a), and one of the concerning aspects of the "fake" movement that is increasingly plaguing academic publishing (Teixeira da Silva, 2017c), raising concerns about our choice of journal. I discovered that factually incorrect and inaccurate information had been used to create that online submission account, namely, an incorrect name, only one of the three authors had been registered, and an undesired role was selected (Figure 2A). Clearly displeased that an inaccurate account had been created on my behalf, without my explicit permission, I issued a complaint by email to the EIC. Within 24 hours, the account had been wiped clean and removed (Figure 2B). I then created my account, with the correct meta-data for me, my co-authors, and the manuscript, all within 1 day (Figure 2C). Peer review was initiated immediately, and accompanied by a sincere and profound apology by the EIC. We felt that despite this technical hiccup and editorial faux pas,

equivalent to a small bump hit on the submission road, our submission was in honest hands.

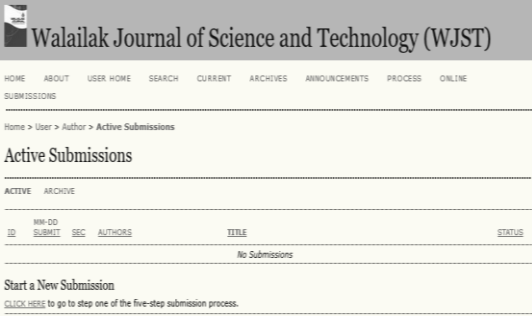
WJST: Submission to publication a smooth process

Peer review, editorial feedback, reviews, and proof processing were completed quickly, and efficiently, all within approximately one month. The journal even accommodated our request to change the position of the table from within the text to the end of the text, given its size, showing fair and rational editorial policies that could take into account, to a limited extent, authors' requests. The accepted and published paper (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2017b) was only published online once two additional rounds of proofs had been approved by all authors, solidifying the notion that editorial oversight and responsibility in WJST was solid. This editorial handling, as well as transparency regarding all submission-related steps, including editorial mistakes, led us to believe that we were not dealing with a POAJ.

A



B



C

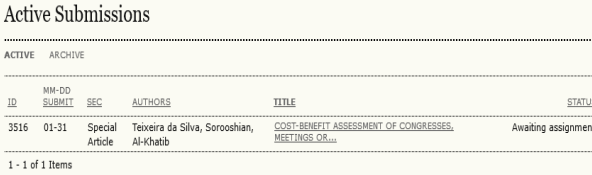


Fig. 2. Unethical Actions by the Editor-in-Chief of The Walailak Journal of Science and Technology

Notes: The Walailak Journal of Science and Technology (WJST) (<http://wjst.wu.ac.th/index.php/wjst>) Editor-in-Chief created an online submission account without permission, and included incorrect information (name) and incomplete information (only one of three authors listed) (A), submitting my paper for me as #3513, making the creation of this account and submission ethically suspect. The account was created by WJST on January 31, 2017. Within 24 hours, the submission had been erased (B). On the same day, February 1, 2017, I changed the account details and resubmitted the manuscript, which was assigned a new number #3516 (C). Screenshots of any proprietary material used under academic fair use (Teixeira da Silva, 2015d).

A suspect paper detected in WJST: Birth of a potential black swan event

The special issue on plant sciences published just prior to the special issue in which our paper appeared caught my attention. While browsing the articles, I came across one paper by Velu et al. (2017). Three possible red flags with that paper caught my eye: a) the vast majority of references

were old, with only three references out of a total of 24 being newer than 2010, and none from 2014-2017; b) the name of the middle author (of three), Wolfgang Reuter, was unfamiliar, even though he was listed at a premier German research institute, the Max-Planck Institute for Biochemistry; c) there was an apparent error or possible manipulation of Figure 1B vs Figure 1C in the Velu et al. paper (Figure 3). These were red flags for the following reasons: a) an old data set may reflect a recycled data set; b) no author by that name could be found at the institutional website (Max Planck Institute of Biochemistry), raising concerns of possible guest or ghost authorship (Teixeira da Silva, Dobránszki, 2016), or possibly even false authorship (Teixeira da Silva, 2017c); c) it was important to access the original data of the purportedly manipulated figure to see if the figure had been manipulated, or if the two photos were truly different figures. Since the paper was recent at that time (2017), the authors would surely have the data to support their claims and counter the challenge.

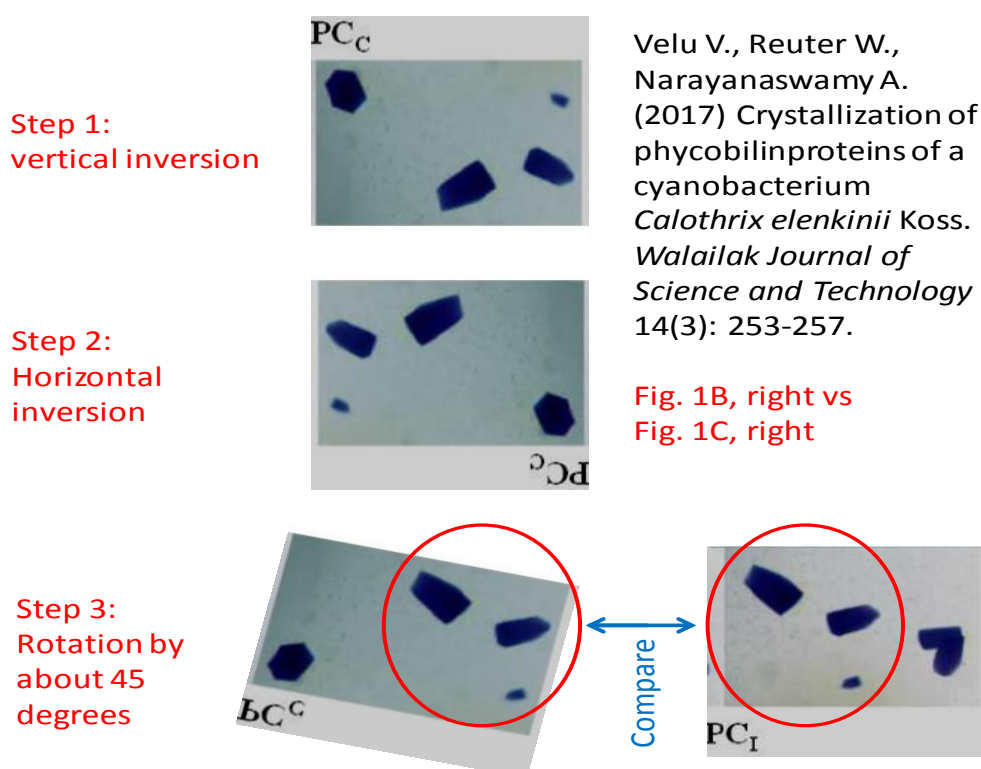


Fig. 3. Analysis of Fig. 1B vs 1C from Velu et al. (2017), showing possible figure duplication and manipulation to represent different treatments

Notes: Screenshots of any proprietary material used under academic fair use (Teixeira da Silva, 2015d). The copyright or open access licensing policies at WJST are not specified.

These concerns could not be posted anonymously to a whistle-blower website PubPeer (The PubPeer database) since WJST papers do not carry a digital object identifier (DOI), and because WJST is not indexed on PubMed, so papers do not have a PMID, which allows for linking to PubPeer. Consequently, the paper could also not be discussed on PubMed Commons, another post-publication peer review platform (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2017a) that was shuttered (Teixeira da Silva, 2018b; Dolgin, 2018). So, the only available option possible was to contact the authors, and copy the editor, to express these concerns. The email of the last author was found, but no email was found for the German author, Wolfgang Reuter. The corresponding author, Dr. Velu, was contacted on February 22, 2017. Three days later, the EIC sent the following request to the authors: "Please response to the inquiry. It will let the journal to determine whether the errata or retraction is needed." After one more reminder from the EIC, the first author responded, as follows, on March 2, 2017 (verbatim, errors uncorrected):

1. Regarding my publication in *Plant science* (Velu et al., 2017).

2. This work is my Ph.d work which i did in max plank institute Germany Munich.

3. About Wolfgang Reuter he has retired from his work during 2004 itself, he guided my work. No contact with him now, since now I am in India.

4. If you give your quire in detail about this matter, if possible ill give explanation for you."

The EIC, clearly caught off-guard with this situation, and also clearly unclear of how to deal with such a situation, stated (verbatim, errors uncorrected), in an email to me: "From the author's reply, it mean that the paper is submitted and published without a consent of one listed author. This sloppiness is directly my fault since I ran the background check the validity of persons and institutions myself. From now on the journal impose the email acknowledgement from all authors. If you have any suggestion how to deal with this particular paper, please do so." This indicated that the journal had no prior experience with this type of situation.

On March 3, 2017, I indicated to the EIC that the paper should be retracted, because I felt that it had violated several key WJST ethical requirements or clauses for authors ([Editorial Policies](#)), as follows:

a) violation of "all co-authors have seen and approved the final version of the paper and have agreed to its submission for publication."

b) violation of "Authors are asked to provide the raw data in connection with a paper for editorial review, and should be prepared to provide public access if practicable, and should in any event be prepared to retain such data for a reasonable time after publication."

c) Author 3 did not respond.

d) The corresponding author failed to offer any plausible explanation for what appeared to be a figure duplication and manipulation to represent two completely different treatments ([Figure 3](#)).

On March 5, 2017, the EIC wrote to the author, with a decision to retract the paper: "Dear Dr Vijaya Velu, Your reply means that the paper is submitted and revised without the consent of one listed author. Moreover, the figure in question is not clarified. As an editor-in-chief of Walailak J Sci & Tech, I decide that tour paper will be retracted. C Sirisathitkul, Walailak Journal of Science and Technology."

This was the first-ever recorded retraction for WJST, a highly unexpected event – the black swan event ([Taleb, 2010](#)) in publishing ([Teixeira da Silva, 2015a](#)) – in what had been perceived as a perfectly flawless OAJ with an impeccable publishing record.

WJST black swan event: Lessons learned, and the way forward

The discovery of a highly improbable event in an otherwise to-date impeccable publishing record of the WJST, which started to publish as an OAJ in 2004, indicates that not all might be well with the editorial process at WJST, as was even expressed by the EIC himself. The WJST does not have a DOAJ green tick or a seal of quality ([DOAJ Seal...](#)), most likely because it does not assign DOIs to articles, and possibly for other reasons (see red cross over DOAJ "quality" symbols in [Fig. 1A](#)).

So, within the space of a single submission, two main aspects of concern were discovered:

1) Editor-created online submission accounts exist, or are created, without informing authors, or without seeking their approval prior to the creation of those accounts;

2) Peer review is fallible and, in just a sample size of one paper, authorship and figure integrity issues were discovered, leading to a retraction, which is a sign of failure, by the journal, the editors, and the authors ([Teixeira da Silva, 2016b](#)). The notion that traditional peer review is imperfect is now a well-established fact ([Teixeira da Silva, Dobránszki, 2015](#)).

However, also within the space of this submission, several positive aspects were discovered:

1) The EIC was highly communicative, responsive, and responsible, not only correcting errors that had been pointed out within the space of hours or days, but admitting openly to his errors, but correcting them. This is highly courageous and commended academic behavior, which shows that the journal's leadership is in good hands. It also shows commendable editorial transparency ([Teixeira da Silva and Dobránszki, 2018](#)).

2) The EIC was willing to soil the journal's impeccable publishing record by publishing a retraction, based on credible evidence of ethical misconduct, but also recognizing the journal's failures, thus marking a black swan event for WJST.

3) In the highly volatile world of OA publishing, especially now that there are a much higher number of competing positive and negative forces and competition than 5 or 10 years ago,

all things considered, the actions of the WJST and its editorial leadership constitute a positive development. These actions would bode well for a positive future of WJST if it remains on this path of honest, but painful, reform, that must now involve a deep level of post-publication peer review (Teixeira da Silva, 2015b) that analyzes the website for predatory aspects, and that examines, in detail, the published literature, for flawed academic papers, errors, or fraud. Initially, the response may be extremely negative, as occurred with the *Archives of Biological Sciences*, a Serbian OAJ that was caught with a highly fraudulent editorial leadership that was subsequently sacked *en masse*, replaced by an entirely new editorial board, including a new EIC, followed by an intense post-publication peer review period that is still incomplete, but leading to at least 20 retractions and errata within the space of just a few months (Teixeira da Silva, 2015c).

Velu et al. (2017) was retracted from WJST on May 8, 2017 (Walailak Journal of Science and Technology), just over two months after the decision by the EIC to retract the paper. The retracted paper was watermarked with a red “RETRACTED” across every page, the retraction notice was clear, explanatory, and apologetic. The EIC further indicated that a post-publication peer review had been conducted, stating: “The journal is more thorough with the e-mail addressess [sic] of co-authors and suggested reviewers. We also inspect the materials already publish before in the back issues.” WJST needs to specify its copyright or licensing policies, as the website and each PDF file do not indicate the license clearly, e.g., is use of OA papers under a CC-BY-4.0 license?

The DOAJ is increasingly being viewed as an OA “whitelist”, and even though it is an OASPA member (OASPA), several entries in the DOAJ list have been discovered with questionable publishing practices, calling into question the validity of the DOAJ lists (Does the DOAJ..., 2017; Teixeira da Silva et al., 2018).

3. Conclusion

Other potential black swan events: Concluding remarks

The discovery of literature in a journal that is erroneous is not necessarily a negative aspect. The publishing status quo generally associates a good academic journal with an error-free academic journal. However, since perfection is impossible to achieve, even among the most highly ranked journals, a perfect, error-free journal is also a myth. The realization that errors need to be corrected, and that some of those errors are “fatal”, leading to retractions, for a multitude of reasons, is simply a maturing aspect of the publishing process that authors, journals, editors, and publishers must learn to accept and live with. In that sense, WJST is not a unique black swan event, or maybe not even a unique event any longer, as retractions rise. Two prominent journals, *Annals of Mathematics* (Retraction Watch) and *Nature Chemistry* (Retraction Watch), also experienced their first retractions, in essence denting their perfect publishing records, fortifying the notion that the literature is indeed imperfect. It is still unclear if the middle author of the Velu et al. (2017) paper, Wolfgang Reuter, is retired, or deceased, but such an unclear status of authors leaves them and their co-authors with a very challenging situation if their status is deceased (Teixeira da Silva, Dobránszki, 2015b), especially since there has been a spike in the militancy of the entire publication process (Teixeira da Silva, 2016c).

4. Limitations

This paper describes, in some detail, the trials and tribulations encountered by a not-so-well-known OA journal that indexed on perceived safe-to-publish-in whitelists like the DOAJ, but that, despite more than 12 years of publishing experience, still managed to make fundamental editorial flaws during manuscript processing, emphasizing that experience does not imply flawlessness. The single case (WJST) may be the tip of the iceberg of the discovery of flaws and fraud within indexed and traditionally whitelisted (e.g., in DOAJ, Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, etc.) OA and non-OA journals. Since a black swan event is usually described as a highly improbable event (Taleb, 2010), but “first retractions” are on the rise, they may no longer be considered as such. Only a meta-analysis of “first retractions”, and the timing of those retractions would be able to offer greater insight into the black swan status of such events.

5. Conflicts of interest

The author has commented on and has been profiled on, PubPeer and Retraction Watch, which were mentioned in this paper. The author was involved in exposing editorial fraud at the *Archives of Biological Sciences*. The author declares no additional conflicts of interest.

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