

# Yes, I'm a journalologist!

Section: Technology and science

written by David Moher | April 15, 2025



Journalology is not a new term. Initially coined in 1989 by Stephen Lock, a former editor in chief of the BMJ (British Medical Journal). Lock was likely the first editor to use data to ask questions about the role and usefulness of journals. The word seems to be having a moment in the sunlight. The magazine Science highlighted the work on journalologists. I usually get lots of questions about journalology, mostly in the form of 'what is it, I've never heard of the term'. There is no consensus definition of journalology even though I direct the Centre for Journalology. I tell people the term is really like looking under the hood of a car and examining the engine. Lots of engines work okay but their output is not optimal. While there are many engines, even entire cars, that are problematic, journalologists don't get much credit for examining the publication process. We often weather backlashes. People are usually interested in positive uplifting stories about medical research curing diseases. After all, these are top notch researchers doing this amazing work; how could there be problems.

In 2023, the magazine Nature reported there was more than 10,000 retractions globally, meaning that journals found some problem with these publications and removed them from public view. In early 2025 the Science reported that there may be upwards of 400,000 paper mill papers floating around the research ecosystem, meaning that researchers paid to have the papers created, written, and published, perhaps not even based

on facts or real data. Our group's own research on predatory journals and publishers is similarly troubling. The United States' Federal Trade Commission successfully fined OMICS, a large publisher of hundreds of journals, \$50 million dollars, a ruling that was upheld on legal appeal. Predatory articles have leaked into the corpus of trusted science, such as PubMed, a database of research articles open to researchers and the public.

There are many theories and opinions as to why there are problems with the publication process. Researchers like me are typically assessed through a process called research assessment. Traditionally this process relied heavily on the number of papers a researcher published in a defined time-period, typically the most recent 18 months. To gain promotion, researchers usually must achieve a certain number of publications yearly. In research performing organizations (RPOs) (e.g., universities, research institutes) language this is often called "publish or perish", meaning that if the researcher can't publish enough papers they may not get promoted and have to leave academia. There is no standard number of publications that researchers need to achieve although most RPOs imply 'the more the merrier'. There is a move to modify research assessment and make it more responsible. Here, the importance of maximal publications is downgraded, and open science and other categories are considered. Several organizations around the world are now advocating for research assessment to consider whether researchers share their data, something patients advocate for but researchers, at least in STEM, really don't do. Similarly, some researchers still don't publish their research, even when it is funded. This diminishes the altruistic participation of patients and the broader public in the research enterprise. Journalologists and others are working hard to ensure all cars and engines work well and contribute to open knowledge of the highest possible standards.