

Critical assessment of a cancer/oncology journal that suddenly ceased publication: *Journal of the Balkan Union of Oncology*

Research Article

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Received 9 April 2024; Accepted 17 May 2024

Abstract: This article provides a brief historical overview of a now-shuttered open access cancer/oncology journal, *Journal of the Balkan Union of Oncology (JBUON)*, whose metrics peaked with a 2020 Clarivate Analytics journal impact factor of 2.533. *JBUON* suddenly ceased publication in December 2021. The scrutiny of *JBUON* papers of this PubMed-indexed journal at the post-publication website PubPeer revealed a myriad of ethical infractions and the likely association with paper mills. In addition to troubling information about *JBUON*'s publishing operations, this paper emphasizes the opaque manipulation of the content of an unknown number of papers, a procedure that is considered unscholarly, dishonest, or even predatory. The fatal publishing errors and mismanagement of this journal that led to its demise serve as a useful learning curve for other cancer/oncology journals that may feel tempted to manipulate the scholarly record, either to "save face" or give the impression of an error-free publication record.

Keywords: blacklists • DOI • open access publishing • predatory publishing • quality

1. Introduction

This article focuses on an open access journal, *Journal of the Balkan Union of Oncology (JBUON)*^[1], that suddenly ceased publication in December 2021, even though the website does not indicate to the public that it has ceased publication. At PubMed, there are 3815 results for 2002–2021.^[2] It is not clear where readers may find the content of volumes 1–6, which are missing from the journal's archives.^[3] Papers in *JBUON* were only published in the PDF format, without any HTML format, and an abstract is indexed at PubMed. Readers can access the PDF of full texts only via a PubMed link to the *JBUON* website. The content of a PDF file, which is the only source, can be easily manipulated, i.e., modified and substituted. *JBUON* also had, according to its website, a 2020

Clarivate Analytics journal impact factor (IF) of 2.533, up from 1.695 in 2019^[4], which would have made it a prime target for abusive cash or rewards schemes associated with the IF^[6,15], potentially including by *JBUON* itself.

JBUON advertises its 2021 IF on its top page but indicates the higher 2020 IF at the footer of most web pages. *JBUON* levied an article processing charge of €520 (there also used to be a "fast track service" for €1500, but this appears to have been scrapped; Fig. 1). *JBUON* claimed to be peer reviewed and to conform to international ethics standards, specifically those of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), and the Council of Science Editors, as noted in the "Journal Information"^[5] and "How to Submit"^[6] pages. *JBUON* claimed to make edits to the published record via errata, and although retractions were not specifically

¹<https://jbuon.com/>

²<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/nlmcatalog/100883428>; <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=Journal+of+Balkan+Union+of+Oncology> [the last published issue (volume 26, issue 6) was not indexed in PubMed].

³<https://jbuon.com/archives/>

⁴Also related, *JBUON* was indexed in the Web of Science between 2007 and 2021.

⁵<https://jbuon.com/journal-information/>

⁶<https://jbuon.com/how-to-submit/>

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A

Publication fees

JBUON is an independent open access journal providing free access to full text of all published articles to all online interested readers around the world. To cover the costs of the publication procedures authors selected for publication pay a fee of **520 euro** per article, irrespective of number of pages, number of tables, figures and color illustrations. This fee is equally distributed among all authors.

B

Fast-Track

With Fast-Track submission you receive the decision of article acceptance or rejection within 15 days. If you want to opt for fast-track submission, please state it clearly in the submission form. Fast track submission fee is 1.500 euro per article and does not guarantee acceptance.

Figure 1: Currently, *JBUON* lists an open-access article process charge of €520 (A), but until 2021, there had also been a “fast track service” for €1500 with an accept/reject decision within 15 days (B), but this was scrapped. Date of screenshots, under fair-use: January 15, 2022 (A); December 19, 2020 (B). Source: <https://jbuon.com/how-to-submit/> (A, B), (B) accessible via the Internet Archive.

mentioned in 2020,^[7] the post-publication policy appears to have changed between 2020 and 2021.^[8] The precise dates when changes were made to editorial and ethical policies are unclear. Opaque edits to the journal website content, including official policies, as well as the content of HTML text and PDF files, are one reason why the “publication history” – which offers a formal, documented incremental system to record changes to the version of the published record – is useful for both the published record and information sources, such as journal websites^[14]. There was also an editorial board with one editor-in-chief, six associate editors, one English editor, and 88 editors.^[9] The PDF files of *JBUON* papers do not have or indicate a digital object identifier (DOI), although each paper (i.e., that is indexed in PubMed) carries a PubMed ID (PMID).

According to the “Journal Information” page, *JBUON* was published by BAKIS Productions LTD,^[10] a TV/film/theatre production company based in Nicosia, Cyprus^[11], although any academic or prospective author would not have been able to glean this from the journal’s contact page,^[12] which only lists a generic email and no physical address. The NCBI page (see footnote 2) indicates that the publisher was formerly Zerbinis Medical Publications in Athens, Greece. Cabells’ Predatory Reports criteria version 1.1 lists opacity in physical address as a minor

predatory criterion^[13], although caution is offered about the reliability of those criteria in determining the “predatory” nature of a journal^[13]. The website content changed between 2020 and 2021, as can be appreciated from clues at the Internet Archive^[14], although the history of changes is patchy, at best. Finally, it is not clear if the director of BAKIS Productions LTD, Stathis Athanasiou, is the same person listed as the *JBUON* editor-in-chief, Athanasiou E. Athanasiou. Stathis Athanasiou claims on his CV that “I also publish an open access Elsevier-indexed scientific journal at *jbuon.com*,”^[15] although he likely meant Scopus, where *JBUON* was indexed from 1999 to 2021¹⁶. Cabells considers false claims of being indexed in famed databases as a severe predatory publishing criterion (see link in footnote 12).

At PubPeer¹⁷, hundreds of *JBUON* papers were profiled, primarily for image-related issues, such as possible figure manipulation, including the existence of the same figures across papers published in different journals, often by completely different or unrelated authors or affiliations, i.e., paper mill-derived publications, as well as stealth corrections by the *JBUON* editors.^[18] Paper mills threaten the integrity of the cancer/oncology literature, as well as the wider biomedical literature since false or fabricated products (e.g., data sets, paid-for-authorship slots, and entire papers) are available upon purchase^[1,7,8,18,19]. In the case of *JBUON*, the publication of an excessive amount of

⁷Under “Proofs”: “Studies should be carried out in accordance with the relevant local, national, and international guidelines. All papers will be sent out for external peer review.”; “Papers [...] will be accepted for publication only if it is made clear that a high standard of ethics was applied in carrying out the investigations.” “After publication, further changes can only be made in the form of an Erratum.” <https://web.archive.org/web/20200629171030/https://jbuon.com/how-to-submit>

⁸*JBUON* publishes three types of post-publication notices. Corrections Expressions of Concern (EOCs) Retraction notices.”

⁹<https://jbuon.com/editorial-board/>

¹⁰<https://bakisproductions.com/>

¹¹<https://cy.linkedin.com/company/woofs>

¹²<https://jbuon.com/contact-us/>

¹³The website does not identify a physical address for the publisher or gives a fake address”, “The website does not identify a physical editorial address for the journal”, “Dead links on the journal or publisher’s website”: <https://blog.cabells.com/2019/03/20/predatoryreport-criteria-v1-1/> (March, 2019).

¹⁴https://web.archive.org/web/2021*/https://jbuon.com/journal-information/

¹⁵<https://stathisathanasiou.com/about-me/#cv>

¹⁶<https://www.scimagojr.com/journalsearch.php?q=28749&tip=sid&clean=0>

¹⁷<https://www.pubpeer.com/search?q=JBUON>

¹⁸<https://forbetterscience.com/2021/01/21/victims-as-perpetrators/> (January 21, 2021)

paper mill-derived papers may have led to its ultimate reputational demise.

2. Conclusions

JBUON claimed journal quality and editorial integrity^[16,17], but at some point, the journal and/or its editors appear to have derailed from the scholarly path, perhaps tempted by the financial benefits that arise from accepting paper mill-derived products^[3], a phenomenon that itself may be linked to abusive career-advancing habits associated with gaming the IF. Academic publishing is becoming more ethically challenging for all parties involved because there are so many sources of misconduct, fraud, and bad actors, all of which may lead to either predatory and/or exploitative behavior. This paper records the rapid historical demise of a PubMed-indexed oncology journal, *JBUON*, which published the last issue in December 2021. The journal's demise resulted from revelations of ethical infractions such as figure and/or data manipulation and the purported association of papers it published with paper mills. At face value, journals like *JBUON* may be perceived to be scholarly, non-predatory, and thus "safe" to publish in merely because they are associated with brands like IF or PubMed. These whitelisted "brands" have provided a secure definition of publishing-safe venues for decades, but the infiltration of indexed and "branded" journals by paper mill-derived research, as one element of fake peer review, impacts all academics and the publishing industry^[4].

Even though *JBUON* papers might have more than one affiliation, only a single affiliation is indicated for any *JBUON* paper at PubMed, suggesting that the PubMed records and/or metadata are incomplete and thus inaccurate (Fig. 2). There are concerns with the credibility of some literature that is indexed in PubMed and thus with PubMed itself^[11,12]. The case of *JBUON* might reflect a wider ill among cancer/oncology journals that might be contributing to some of its irreproducibility, behavior breeds mistrust in cancer and oncological science^[2,5,9], and in science more widely. *JBUON* is not the first cancer/oncology journal to be afflicted by paper mills, nor is it the last. As one example, another cancer/oncology journal, *Tumor Biology*, which was indexed and also carried an IF but then lost it, as well as its PubMed indexing, is struggling to survive in a hyper-competitive environment, reputationally weighed down by multiple retractions^[10]. The Retraction Watch/Crossref database currently (5 May 2024) lists 40 retractions and five expressions of concern for *JBUON*.^[19]

¹⁹<http://retractiondatabase.org/>

> *J BUON*. May-Jun 2020;25(3):1463-1468.

A Anticancer effects of Lanostane against human gastric cancer cells involves autophagy, apoptosis and modulation of m-TOR/PI3K/AKT signalling pathway

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PMID: 32862591

Free article

B *JBUON* 2020; 25(5): 1463-1468
ISSN: 1107-0625, online ISSN: 2241-6293 • www.jbuon.com
Email: editorial_office@jbuon.com

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Anticancer effects of Lanostane against human gastric cancer cells involves autophagy, apoptosis and modulation of m-TOR/PI3K/AKT signalling pathway

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Figure 2: PubMed only lists one affiliation for all *JBUON* papers (A), even if papers may carry multiple affiliations. Indicated is <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32862591/>, which in fact has seven affiliations (B). The bibliometric information at PubMed is thus incomplete, and thus misleading. Date of screenshots (Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License): January 15, 2022.

Funding

The author and this work are not funded.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest of relevance to this paper.

Disclaimer

In 2020 and 2021, the author contacted *JBUON* to express concerns with the content published in it, including content manipulation (i.e., opaque replacement of figures).

Authorship

The author contributed to the compilation, writing, development, and editing of the paper.

Note regarding websites

All websites, including those in the reference list and page footers, last accessed 17 February 2024.

Acknowledgment

The author thanks the assistance of Serhii Nazarovets (Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University, Kyiv, Ukraine) in verifying *JBUON*'s indexing in Scopus and Web of Science.

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