

Editorial

The Dragon of Prestige: Schwartz's Satire and the Reality of Zombie Journals

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Although the open-access era has contributed to the spread of predatory and low-quality journals, it has also made publishing more democratic and empowered editors and editorial board members to challenge entrenched commercial interests, transcending academic rigour. In some cases, academic editors have even resigned en masse in protest against major journal conglomerates, and academic societies have found browbeating editors risky.

A recent publication discusses zombie and breakaway journals [1].

'Following a mass resignation, editors and editorial boards sometimes collectively found a rival "Breakaway" journal, motivated by objections to the previous publisher's practices, aspirations for editorial or organisational autonomy, or both.

The journal left behind, re-staffed by its publisher and continued under the same brand, becomes a "Zombie" journal. A Zombie journal functions as an institutional shell that retains the brand, historic corpus, and indexing in databases (e.g., Web of Science, Scopus), but loses the organisational community of editors, reviewers, and authors who previously sustained the journal.'

When editors leave, peer-review quality often collapses, acceptance rates may spike, reviewer turnaround times stretch, and the intellectual rigour that made the journal respected disappears. Yet the journal retains its impact factor and indexing, creating a false sense of prestige. Researchers might submit, believing they are publishing in a respected venue, only to find that the peer review no longer reflects the standards they expect. This is especially dangerous for early-career researchers building their tenure files, because promotion

committees rarely check whether the editorial board remains intact and may evaluate a zombie journal based on its historical reputation even as its quality declines.

The breakaway journal, by contrast, is typically founded by the original editors who valued rigour and autonomy, often operating as a diamond open-access journal with no fees for authors or readers, prioritising transparent peer review, fair timelines, and editorial independence. Yet researchers may dismiss them as "new" and "unproven" when, in fact, the editorial team and standards are the same ones that made the original journal respected.

This is fundamentally about power in scholarly publishing: for decades, academics have provided the labour, writing, reviewing, and editing for free while publishers have controlled from subscriptions, branding and article processing charges.

Breakaway journals represent an attempt to reclaim editorial autonomy and place scholarly communities, rather than brand identity alone, at the centre of academic publishing. Zombie journals, in contrast, retain the historic name and indexing but may lose the intellectual community that gave them credibility.

What can researchers do? Before submitting, check whether the editorial board remains intact and when the journal website was last updated. Search for reports of mass editorial resignations or announcements of breakaway journals. When an editorial board resigns collectively, the breakaway journal may better reflect the standards and scholarly culture that originally made the journal respected. Researchers should also educate departments and promotion committees about the

importance of editorial continuity rather than relying solely on impact factors or indexing metrics when evaluating journal quality.

Like the dragon in Evgeny Schwartz's drama [2], the zombie journal is an undead beast that thrives on

institutional inertia and blind obedience to brand names rather than on living scholarly communities. It can be challenged only when researchers choose to prioritise scholarly integrity over prestige alone.

References

1. Siler K. Splitting status and substance: The diverging fates of breakaway and zombie journals. *Res Policy*. 2026;55:105519. doi:10.1016/j.respol.2026.105519.
2. Evgeny Schwartz (1896–1958) is a Soviet writer. His satirical play, *The Dragon*, uses a fairy-tale allegory to critique totalitarianism, demonstrating how a populace can become psychological accomplices in their own oppression