

Tell-tale signs of stealth journal takeovers: A bibliometric approach to detecting questionable publisher acquisitions

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Abstract

Stealth journal takeovers, that is, the discreet acquisition of established academic journals by entities with questionable publishing practices, represent an emerging threat to the integrity of scholarly communication. This study proposes a set of bibliometric analyses to detect such takeovers, focusing on sudden shifts in citation patterns and authorship networks. Based on an analysis of 55 journals linked to a known network of related publishers, we identify substantial increases in cross-journal citations and shared authorship following ownership transitions, often between journals with no clear thematic connection. These patterns may serve as early warning signals for bibliographic databases and other academic stakeholders aiming to avoid compromised journals. Our findings also demonstrate the potential of scientometric methods to support the detection of problematic publishing practices, contributing to the growing field of forensic scientometrics.

1. Introduction

1.1. Known fraudulent and questionable publishing practices

In recent years, a growing number of fraudulent and questionable publishing practices has emerged aiming to exploit the increasing pressure on researchers to publish. This goal is mostly driven by the need to meet evaluation criteria for hiring, promotion, or funding, a phenomenon usually referred to as *publish or perish* (Delgado López-Cózar & Martín-Martín, 2024; Hanson et al., 2024; Kurt, 2018; Mertkan et al., 2021; Öztürk & Taşkın, 2024).

Boundaries between fraudulent and questionable publishing practices are not easy to define, but there is some consensus that entities that engage in these practices, the so-called *predatory publishers*, are those that “prioritize self-interest at the expense of scholarship and are characterized by false or misleading information, deviation from best editorial and publication practices, a lack of transparency, and/or the use of aggressive and indiscriminate solicitation practices” (Grudniewicz et al., 2019).

One of the earliest and most prominent manifestations of this phenomenon involved organizations that falsely claimed to offer peer-reviewed, scholarly publishing services through newly created journals operating under the APC business model (Beall, 2013). In practice, these entities often bypassed meaningful editorial scrutiny, instead prioritizing the collection of article processing charges (APCs) from authors. A notable example of this is the OMICS Group, which was eventually fined by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission for misrepresenting the services it provided to authors (Federal Trade Commission, 2019).

Another fraudulent business model is that of *hijacked journals*, in which a malicious entity appropriates the identity of an existing journal. This may involve creating a counterfeit website that closely imitates the original, or even seizing control of the journal’s official domain name. By impersonating a legitimate outlet, these actors deceive authors into submitting their manuscripts, and paying APCs, under false pretences (Abalkina, 2023a).

A third model involves the emergence of so-called *paper mills*: commercial operations that produce large quantities of fabricated or ghostwritten manuscripts, and/or broker authorship positions on pre-written papers. These operations cater to researchers willing to pay for undeserved co-authorship, often subverting the editorial process through manipulation of peer

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review, or collusion with journal editors in order to secure editorial acceptance and publication (Abalkina, 2023b; Abalkina et al., 2025).

1.2. Stealth journal takeovers: A further refinement of the paper mill model?

More recently, a less discussed yet equally concerning phenomenon has been discovered: the acquisition of legitimate academic journals by little-known publishing entities, some of which have previously been associated with questionable publishing practices (see for example, Smut Clyde, 2023; Cabezas-Clavijo et al., 2023; Delgado-López-Cózar & Martín-Martín, 2024;). In many cases, these journals were originally founded by individual scholars or small publishers, and in some instances, they were even supported by university presses. What these journals have in common is that they are indexed in curated bibliographic databases such as Web of Science and Scopus, which, despite criticism (Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment, 2022; DORA, 2012), are still frequently used by academic evaluation systems to judge research quality.

We investigated the phenomenon of journal takeovers in a previous study, after discovering that two leading Spanish journals, *Comunicar* and *Profesional de la Información*, had both been acquired by the same (previously unknown to us) publisher: Oxbridge Publishing House. This prompted us to examine the publisher more closely. Our analysis revealed that Oxbridge was part of a network of publishing entities controlled by the same group of people. Several of them were registered at the same address near Birmingham, UK, while others were based in Malaysia. By examining publicly available information, we identified a total of 36 journals that had become linked to this network between 2020 and 2024 (Martín-Martín & Delgado López-Cózar, 2025).

Our initial analysis shows that after the acquisition, which typically took place without transparent communication to the academic community, journals often underwent abrupt and significant changes. These include the introduction or sharp increase of APCs, a substantial rise in publication volume, rapid transformation in the journal's author base and editorial standards, and the publication of articles well outside the thematic scope of the journal.

Further red flags included the use of fake, mismanaged, or misappropriated DOIs (for example, DOIs that do not exist, DOIs that do not adequately resolve to valid content, or that point to entirely unrelated documents) as well as editorial boards that remain unchanged on the journal's website, even after former editors have disassociated themselves and formally requested the removal of their names. These signs indicate a serious decline in editorial oversight and transparency, raising concerns about the integrity of the publication process in the affected journals.

Testimonies from individuals with editorial roles in these journals corroborated the evidence of a lack of transparency and concerns about editorial practices that began to emerge after the acquisitions, uncovered by our initial analysis. Below, we highlight a few examples that surfaced following the publication of our initial study, although additional cases are documented within the analysis itself (Martín-Martín & Delgado López-Cózar, 2025).

- When asked about concerns regarding a decline in editorial quality following the publisher transition, the editor-in-chief for Europe and the Americas at *Profesional de la Información* stated that he could “vouch for the quality, ethics, and good work, at least of my region, which is Europe and the Americas” (Ansedo, 2025), implying the existence of a parallel (but never publicly disclosed) editorial team within the same journal, responsible for managing and accepting submissions from other parts of the world. Indeed, when shortly after the journal was delisted by Web of Science, the editorial team “for Europe and the Americas” attributed responsibility to an “Asian

editor” (Baiget, 2025), despite there having been no public indication that any such editor had ever been involved in the journal’s management.

- In a similar case, the editors of *Cuadernos de Economía* (Spanish Journal of Economics and Finance) sold the journal to OAText¹, a publisher that had been included in Beall’s 2014 list of “potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publishers”. Among the conditions of their agreement, OAText reportedly requested that, “for the moment”, its name should not appear on the journal’s website, and that no changes would be made to the webpage containing information about the journal (Sánchez Caballero, 2025). After realizing that the journal had begun engaging in malpractice, the former editors resigned from their positions and requested to be removed from the page listing the editorial team. Despite repeated efforts, their requests were ignored.

While stealth journal takeovers may be intended simply as a means to exploit the APC-based scholarly publishing model for profit maximization, it is also reasonable to speculate that they might represent a further refinement of the paper mill business model. In the operations of a paper mill, a critical step is ensuring that fabricated or brokered manuscripts are accepted and published in journals, ideally in outlets indexed in trusted journal rankings commonly used in academic evaluation systems. Acquiring journals that already possess such recognition offers a shortcut in this process, providing a seemingly legitimate and reputable publishing channel through which the operation can be streamlined. Furthermore, maintaining the appearance that no significant change has taken place, for example by withholding information about changes in ownership or editorial management, is compatible with an intent to mislead researchers and other stakeholders in the scholarly community.

Stealth journal takeovers arguably pose a greater threat than hijacked journals. In cases of hijacking, the original journal can often continue to operate, even if its identity has been fraudulently appropriated by a separate entity. In contrast, when a stealth takeover occurs, the original journal effectively ceases to exist, as its publishing practices, and often its editorial team and board, are replaced following the sale. This loss is particularly concerning given that, as far as we have been able to determine, the journals most frequently affected by these takeovers tend to be small, often serving national or regional academic communities. As such, this phenomenon represents a serious threat to academic bibliodiversity, undermining the plurality of voices and editorial models in scholarly publishing.

2. Objectives

While methods to detect paper mill activity and other types of questionable publishing practices are already being developed (see for example, Porter & McIntosh, 2024), the issue of identifying stealth journal takeovers has not yet received specific methodological attention.

Identifying stealth journal takeovers is relevant to multiple stakeholders within the academic community. Curated bibliographic databases may wish to delist such journals in order to preserve the integrity and quality of their indexing. Researchers selecting where to publish may want to avoid journals engaged in questionable publishing practices. Institutions and funders could use this information to reconsider whether to cover publication fees in such journals. Finally, research evaluators should be aware of the existence of these cases in order to better contextualise and assess the work of authors who have published in potentially compromised outlets.

¹ This detail only came to light thanks to the work of science journalist Daniel Sánchez Caballero. In our own analysis, we were only able to identify a connection between the journal and Oxbridge Publishing House.

In this analysis, we propose and test a series of bibliometric approaches designed to uncover sudden shifts in a journal's publication patterns, which may serve as indicators of potential stealth takeovers. Specifically, beyond the previously examined issues of sudden changes in the author base and the use of fake DOIs (Martín-Martín & Delgado López-Cózar, 2025), we introduce two additional analyses:

- Changes in citation patterns, focusing on the appearance of citations to journals that had not been cited previously in the target journals.
- Changes in author communities across journals, aimed at identifying whether journals that did not share authors prior to the acquisition begin to do so afterward.

3. Data and methods

To identify changes in citation patterns and author communities, we conducted an exploratory analysis focusing on the 36 journals identified in our previous study as being linked to a network of related questionable publishers (Martín-Martín & Delgado López-Cózar, 2025). In addition, we included 19 further journals which, among those that had not been cited by the 36 journals prior to the acquisition, emerged as some of the most frequently cited following the publisher transition. In total, we selected 55 journals for this analysis (the complete list will be visible in the results).

All 55 journals included in the analysis are, or have been at some point, indexed in Scopus. We selected Scopus as the most appropriate data source for this study because, unlike other bibliographic databases, it has largely maintained coverage of these journals following their publisher transitions. In contrast, many of these journals are poorly covered by other databases, likely due to the recurrent use of fake DOIs (many indexing systems now rely on metadata from DOI registries for content ingestion). Web of Science had at some point indexed 17 of the 36 journals included in our original analysis. However, by the time we published our findings, 11 of them had already been delisted. Furthermore, less than two months after the publication of our study, the remaining 6 journals were also de-listed from the database.

In other words, in the absence of an open registry covering these publications, it is precisely the interest of these journals in remaining indexed in Scopus, combined with Scopus's slow response in delisting them, that has allowed us to observe and analyse the phenomenon in greater detail.

Data collection was conducted at multiple points in time, as additional journals displaying similar patterns were progressively identified. Specifically, we collected data in March and June of 2024, and in January, February, March, and April of 2025. During this process, we observed that Scopus had begun removing document records for some of the journals it had decided to discontinue. To counteract this retroactive deindexing of records which would negatively affect our analysis, instead of relying solely on the most recent data extraction from Scopus, we constructed a consolidated dataset by merging all extracted datasets and retaining the most recent version of each unique document record. In the end we collected a total of 34,435 document records. However, some document records from our target journals may have already been removed prior to our initial data extraction in March 2024.

For each journal, we gathered evidence to identify the first issue published after the publisher transition. In a few cases, this information was explicitly stated; in others, it was inferred based on abrupt editorial changes, such as the introduction of fake DOIs. In all cases, the transition took place between 2020 and 2024. Each Scopus record was then labelled as either pre- or post-transition. In a real-world scenario where stealth journal transfers need to be identified without access to public information about the ownership change, a similar analysis could be conducted

by comparing publication patterns from a given year to those of the immediately preceding years.

To analyse changes in citation patterns, we first processed the cited reference data extracted from Scopus. The retrieved records contained over 1.2 million cited references. We developed a parser in R, and matched journal names found in the cited references against several journal lists, including the Scopus Source List and the PubMed-indexed journals list, which contains abbreviated name variants. In addition, we used OpenRefine to identify and cluster potential duplicate variants of journal names within the references. Particular attention was given to identifying citations to any of the 55 journals included in our analysis. In the end, we were able to match 74% of all cited references in our dataset (over 900k cited references) to a journal indexed in Scopus.

For the author community analysis, we relied on Scopus's built-in author metadata. While this data is not always perfectly standardised, we consider it sufficiently reliable to detect meaningful trends in authorship across journals.

4. Results

4.1. Detecting abrupt changes in citation patterns

Before the publisher transitions took place, there were 157 pairwise citation relationships between the journals included in the analysis (Figure 1, graph on the left), excluding self-citations (i.e., citations from a journal to itself), but treating citations from journal A to journal B and from journal B to journal A as distinct relationships. In 83 of these cases (53%), only one citation was recorded from one journal to the other. In total, 1,864 citations occurred among these journals during this period. Some of the stronger citation links appear legitimate, as they involve journals covering similar subject areas or addressing similar audiences. For example, *Comunicar*, *Profesional de la Información*, and *Fonseca Journal of Communication* are all focused on communication studies and primarily target a Spanish-speaking readership. These journals displayed relatively strong citation connections prior to the publisher transitions. Similarly, several journals in the fields of education and sports studies also exhibited citation links before the change in ownership.

After the publisher transitions, we observed 980 pairwise citation relationships between the journals in our analysis (excluding journal self-citations). Of these, 897 (91%) occurred between journal pairs that had not previously cited each other (Figure 1, graph on the right). Among these 897 new citation links, 247 (27%) involved only a single citation. In total, 6,511 citations were recorded among these journals after the publisher transitions, 5,637 of which (86%) occurred between journals that had not cited each other before the transition.

These results clearly show that, following the sale of the journals, citation relationships among the analysed titles increased dramatically, both in terms of the number of new citation connections established and the intensity of those relationships, as well as in the absolute volume of citations exchanged.

To illustrate this abrupt shift in citation patterns, Table 1 presents the journals cited in articles published by *Profesional de la Información* in 2024 (after the publisher transition), including only those that had not been previously cited in the journal. A total of 30 journals fall into this category, having begun to receive citations only after the transition. Notably, 20 of these journals are among the 36 titles identified as being linked to the network of publishers currently managing the acquired journals. Many of these newly introduced references appear to be inconsistent with the thematic scope of *Profesional de la Información*.

The same pattern of thematically inconsistent citations can be observed across many of the journals analysed. For example, some of the strongest citation relationships established after the publisher transitions involve journals with little or no apparent disciplinary overlap — such as *Journal of Fish Taxonomy* and *Revista Internacional de Medicina y Ciencias de la Actividad Física y del Deporte* (a Spanish journal on sports medicine), or *Journal of Commercial Biotechnology* and *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*.

Figure 1. Changes in citation relationships across analysed journals, before and after publisher transition.

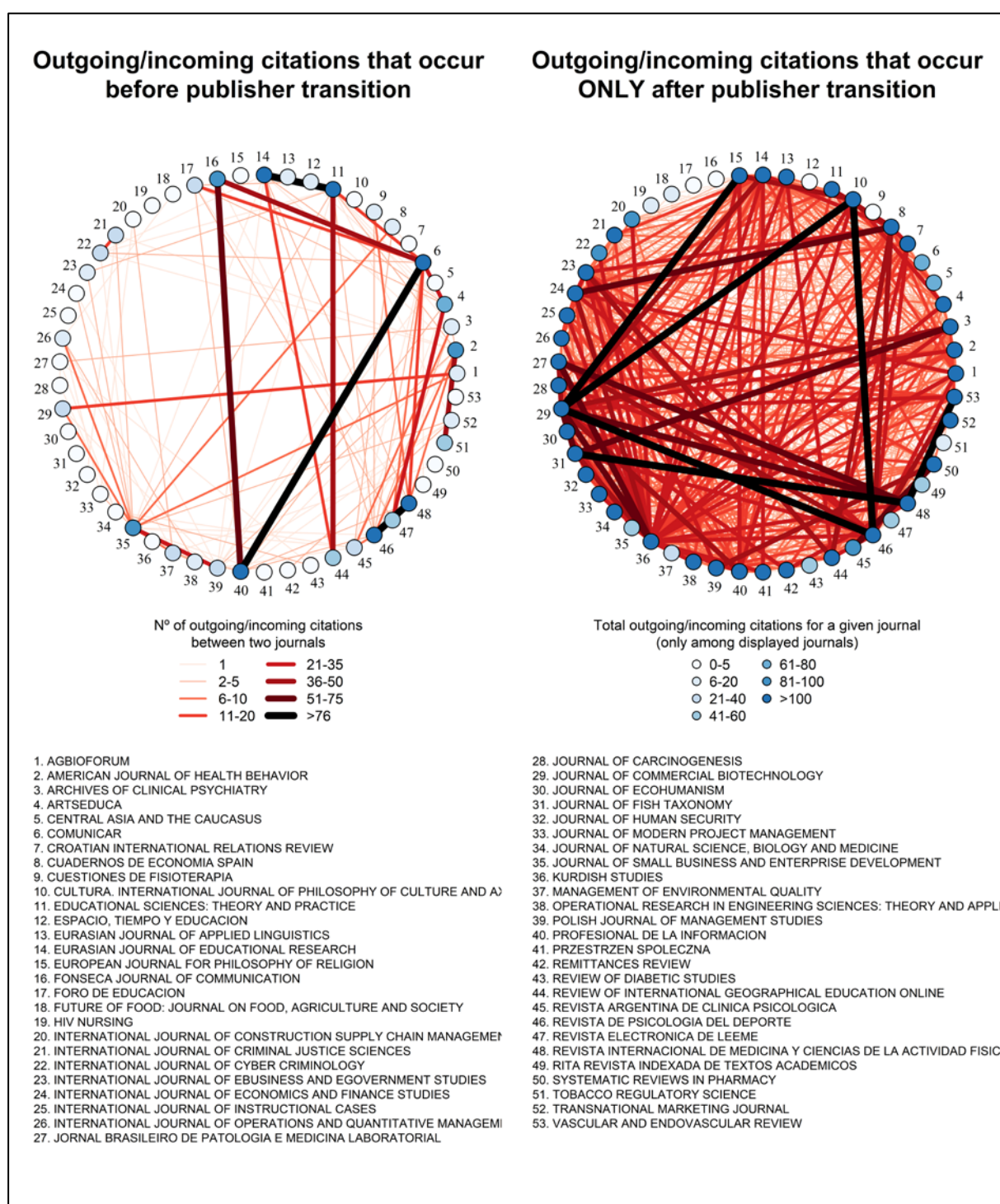


Table 1. Reference distribution in 2024 articles from *Profesional de la Información* (EPI), including only journals that had not been cited before 2024.

Cited journal	Nº of references to cited journal in EPI articles
JOURNAL OF COMMERCIAL BIOTECHNOLOGY	39
CULTURA. INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE AND AXIOLOGY	23
EUROPEAN JOURNAL FOR PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION	23
EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES: THEORY AND PRACTICE	12
CROATIAN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS REVIEW	11
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INSTRUCTIONAL CASES	11
ARTSEDUCA	10
EURASIAN JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS	10
EURASIAN JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH	10
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF EBUSINESS AND EGOVERNMENT STUDIES	10
RITA REVISTA INDEXADA DE TEXTOS ACADEMICOS	10
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPERATIONS AND QUANTITATIVE MANAGEMENT	9
OPERATIONAL RESEARCH IN ENGINEERING SCIENCES: THEORY AND APPLICATIONS	9
TRANSNATIONAL MARKETING JOURNAL	9
AGBIOFORUM	8
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CYBER CRIMINOLOGY	8
JOURNAL OF CARCINOGENESIS	8
JOURNAL OF MODERN PROJECT MANAGEMENT	8
PRZESTRZEN SPOLECZNA	8
REVIEW OF DIABETIC STUDIES	8
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CONSTRUCTION SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT	6
JOURNAL OF HUMAN SECURITY	6
JOURNAL OF NATURAL SCIENCE, BIOLOGY AND MEDICINE	6
CUADERNOS DE ECONOMIA	5
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ECONOMICS AND FINANCE STUDIES	5
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE SCIENCES	4
PALARCH'S JOURNAL OF ARCHAEOLOGY OF EGYPT/ EGYPTOLOGY	3
MANAGEMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY	2
KURDISH STUDIES	1
SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS IN PHARMACY	1

* In bold: journals that had already been identified as part of the 36 journals acquired by questionable publishers

4.2. Detecting abrupt changes in author communities

Before the publisher transition, there were 103 pairs of journals that had published papers by at least one common author (Figure 2, graph on the left). In 48 of these cases (47%), the two journals shared exactly one author. As with citation relationships, it is reasonable to expect some degree of author overlap between journals, particularly when they share a similar thematic focus or serve the same academic community.

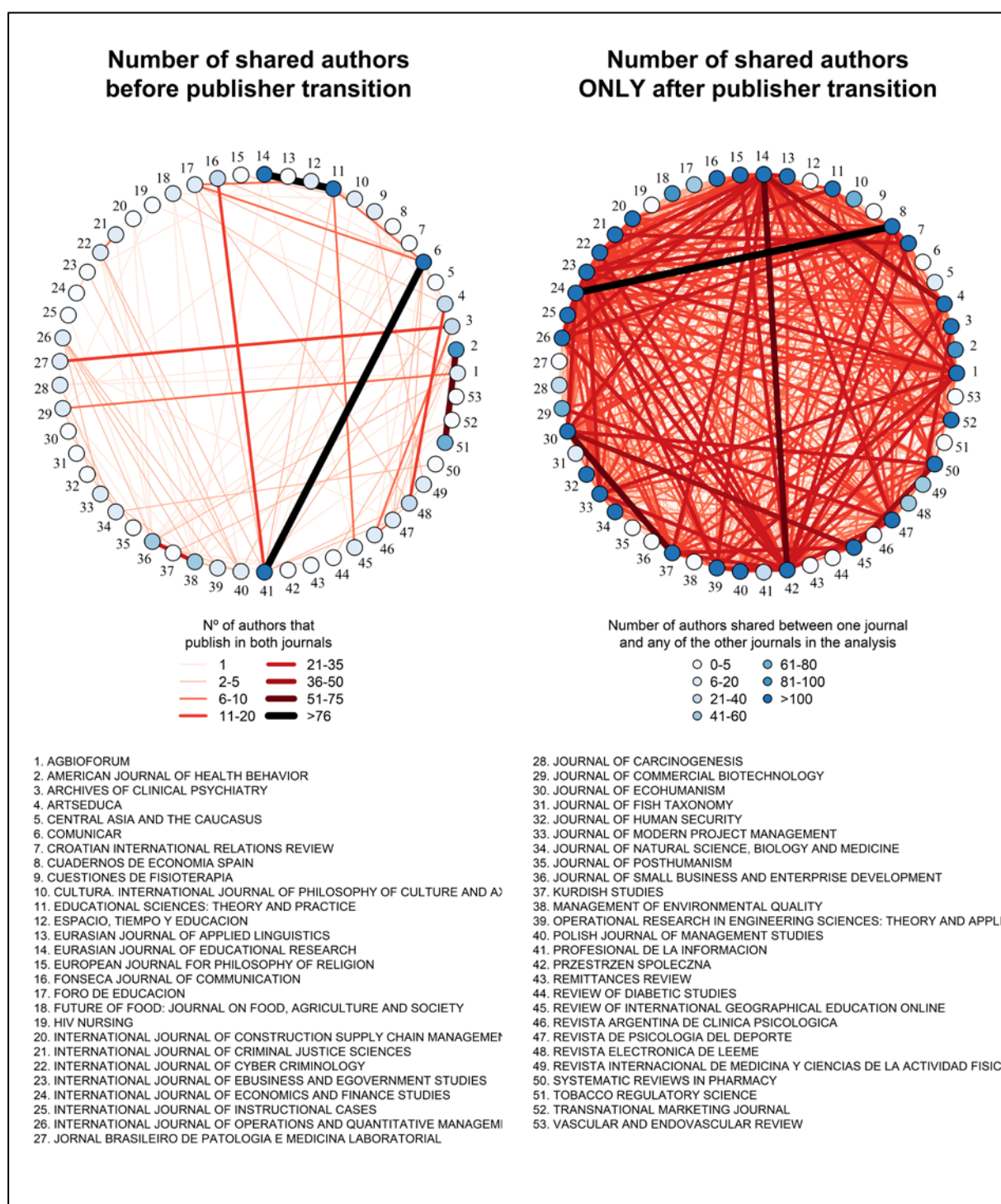
In the period following the publisher transition, we identified 634 journal pairs that shared at least one common author (Figure 2, graph on the right). In 100 of these cases (16%), the overlap consisted of exactly one author, while the remaining pairs exhibited stronger connections involving multiple shared authors. Notably, in 589 of the 634 pairs (93%), no such author relationship existed prior to the transition. These results suggest that, following the publisher transition, not only does the author base of individual journals change, as shown in our previous analysis (Martín-Martín & Delgado López-Cózar, 2025), but that the author base becomes increasingly homogeneous across this set of journals, with a growing number of authors publishing in multiple journals within the same network.

Some of the strongest connections between journals based on shared authorship illustrate the extent of this shift:

- *Cuadernos de Economía* and *International Journal of Economics and Finance Studies* now share 78 authors. Although both focus on research in economics, the former journal was originally from Spain, while the latter was originally from Turkey, and prior to the publisher transition, they had not shared any authors.
- *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research* and *Przestrzeń Społeczna* now share 63 authors. The former was originally a Turkish journal in the field of education, while the latter was a Polish journal publishing interdisciplinary research in the social sciences. No shared authorship existed between them before the transition.
- *Kurdish Studies* and *Journal of Ecohumanism* now share 53 authors, despite having had no shared authors prior to the change in ownership.

At the author level, this pattern is reflected in individual authors publishing across numerous journals, despite clear thematic differences among them. In one extreme case, we identified an author who, in the last five years, has published over 90 documents across 30 of the journals included in our analysis. These publications span a wide range of unrelated subject areas, including journals such as *International Journal of E-Business and E-Government Studies*, *Journal of Natural Science, Biology and Medicine*, *International Journal of Cyber Criminology*, *Cuadernos de Economía*, and *Revista de Psiquiatría Clínica*, among many others.

Figure 2. Changes in shared authors across analysed journals, before and after publisher transition.



5. Discussion and conclusions

The results of this analysis reveal clear and measurable disruptions in the publishing patterns of journals following their acquisition by questionable publishing entities. In particular, we have observed abrupt increases in cross-journal citations and shared authorship networks that cannot be easily explained by disciplinary proximity or natural academic collaboration. These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that stealth journal takeovers not only alter the

editorial and operational structure of the journals but also reconfigure their relational ecosystem in ways that may support broader, coordinated practices such as those associated with paper mills.

The apparent artificial concentration of authors and citation flows within a network of acquired journals raises concerns about editorial independence, scientific integrity, and manipulation of publication metrics. Furthermore, the thematic inconsistencies found in citation and authorship patterns point to the deliberate orchestration of exchanges between journals with no previous relationship, likely to simulate scientific activity and inflate indicators.

These findings have implications for several key stakeholders in the scholarly publishing ecosystem:

- **Bibliographic databases** should establish clearer protocols and faster mechanisms to detect and respond to editorial takeovers that result in integrity violations. While the continued presence of these journals in Scopus allowed us to perform this analysis, it also illustrates the risk of retaining compromised content within trusted indexing systems.
- **Evaluation agencies and academic institutions** must reconsider the overreliance on journal-level metrics and indexing as proxies for research quality. Blindly trusting indexed journals as inherently reliable opens the door to the legitimisation of questionable publishing practices.
- **Researchers serving on editorial boards** should take proactive steps to ensure transparency and protect the integrity of the journals they are associated with. In cases where a takeover has already occurred, publicly disclosing the situation and withdrawing from the editorial team may serve as an important signal to the research community.

Beyond the immediate ethical concerns, stealth journal takeovers may represent a deeper threat to the diversity and richness of academic publishing. The takeover and repurposing of small, often regionally anchored journals risks erasing vital editorial voices and replacing them with homogenised, profit-driven models that prioritise volume over value. As such, this phenomenon is not only a challenge to publication ethics but also a threat to academic bibliodiversity.

To effectively address this issue, coordinated efforts will be needed across data providers, institutions, funders, and researchers. Better transparency around journal ownership, improved detection of anomalous patterns, and critical reflection on the incentives embedded in research evaluation systems are all necessary steps to preserve the integrity and diversity of scholarly communication.

This study also demonstrates the potential of scientometric techniques to serve as investigative tools in uncovering irregularities in scholarly publishing. By analysing citation patterns, co-authorship networks, and abrupt changes in journal behaviour, we show how bibliometric evidence can help flag potential cases of editorial misconduct, questionable publishing practices, or even academic fraud. In this sense, our approach aligns with the emerging field of forensic scientometrics (FoSci), which advocates for the use of quantitative indicators not only to describe scholarly activity, but also to detect and document behaviours that compromise the integrity of academic publishing (McIntosh & Vitale, 2024). The systematic application of these methods could support the development of early-warning systems and foster greater accountability across the publishing ecosystem.

7. Open Science Practices

The raw data for this analysis cannot be openly shared, as the Scopus use license precludes it. Aggregated data, as well as code for the analysis will be made available in a future revised version of this manuscript.

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9. Author contributions

CRedit: AM: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft; EDL: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing

10. Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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