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Graphic detail

May 30th 2020 edition

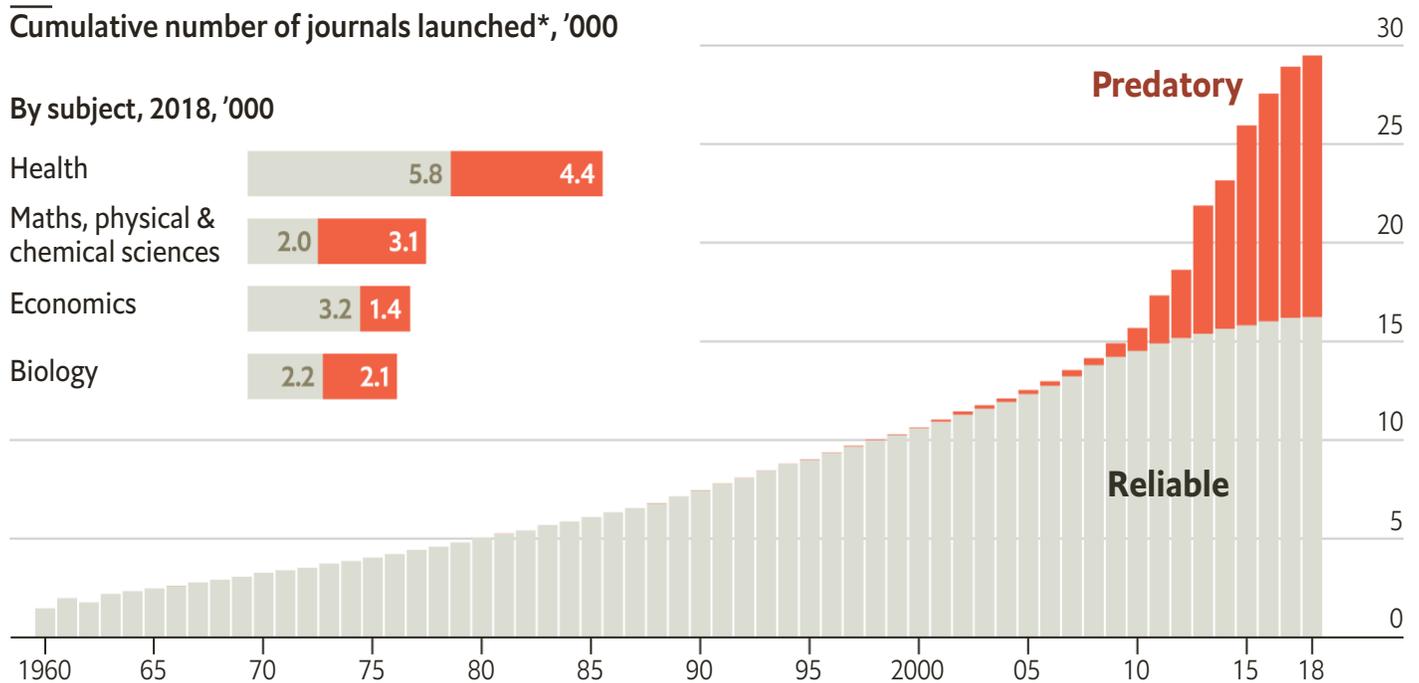
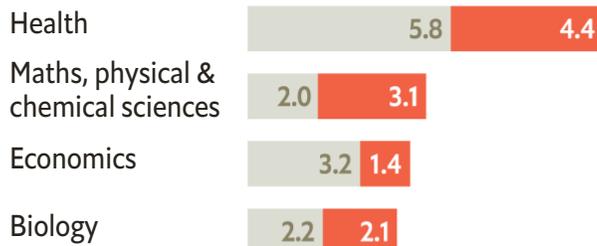
Garbage in

How to spot dodgy academic journals

Missing back issues and speedy promised publication times are red flags

Cumulative number of journals launched*, '000

By subject, 2018, '000



*Extrapolated from a random sample of 4,800 journals

As COVID-19 spreads, scientists are racing to study it. Although journals have tried to speed up peer review, many authors bypass it altogether by uploading working papers to preprint sites. Flimsy findings can then travel as fast as the virus.

Most scholars who share preprints are doing their best to make vital discoveries.

However, some authors seek to pad their résumés by publishing underwhelming

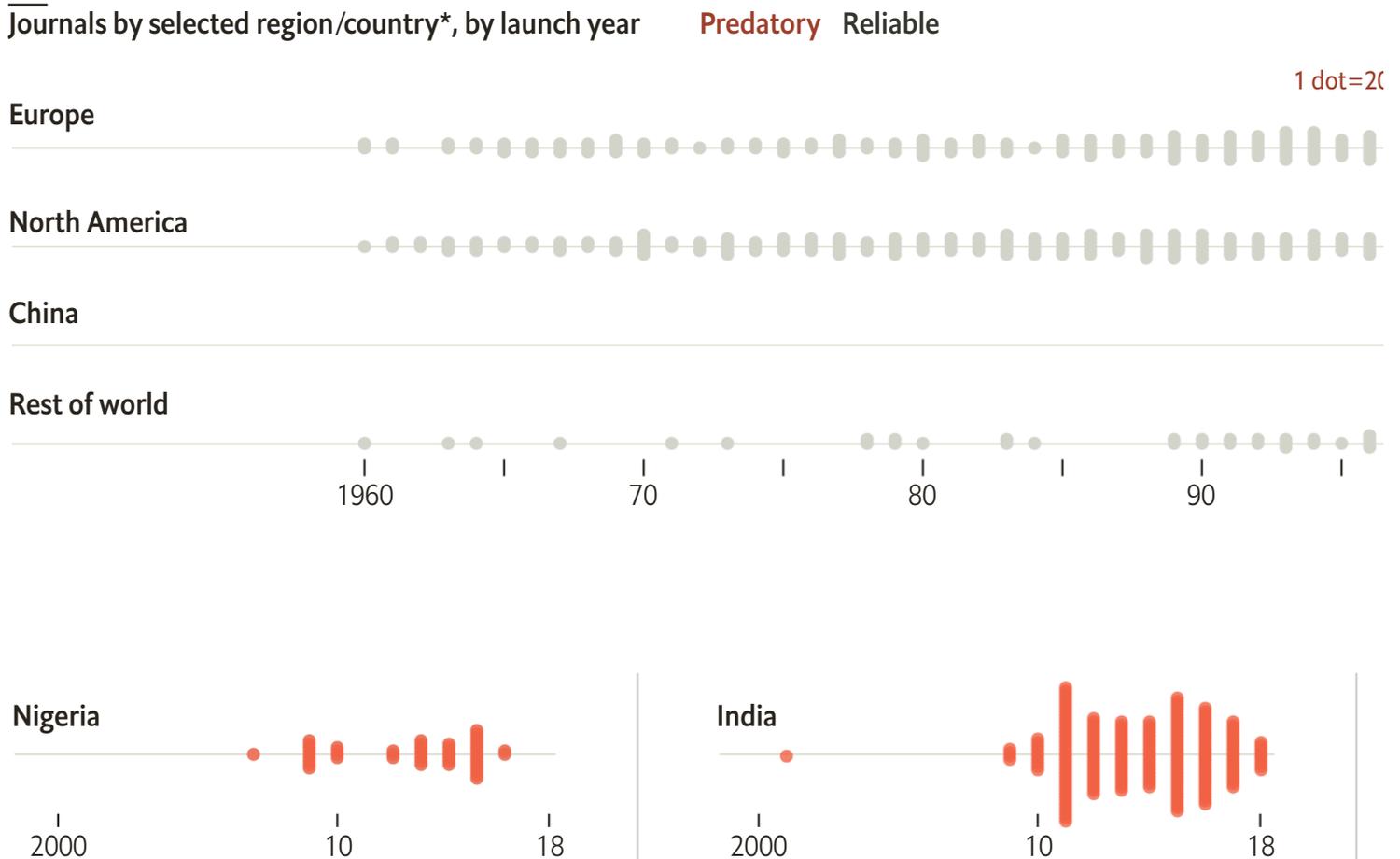
However, some authors seek to pad their resumes by publishing underwhelming, repetitive or fake research. As safeguards are relaxed, journalists and governments need to be on high alert to spot such studies.

These articles mostly appear in “predatory” journals, which make use of the popular “open-access” model—charging fees to authors, rather than to readers—to publish any old tosh for money. According to Cabells, a firm that maintains a blacklist of such journals in English, some 1,000 existed in 2010. Today there are at least 13,000.

Some scammers are careless. Mike Daube, a professor of public health, got his dog onto seven journals’ boards. Cabells uses 65 criteria to spot wilier frauds. “Severe” infractions, such as missing back issues, lead straight to blacklisting. Lesser ones, like poor spelling or offers of speedy publication, set off further investigation.

Journals’ fields offer few clues. The mix of topics is similar on Cabells’ whitelist, of 16,000 reliable journals, and its blacklist. On both, a third of titles relate to health.

Most journals in English from Nigeria and India are on a blacklist



*Extrapolated from a random sample of 4,800 journals

Geography is more revealing. Cabells lists only a few reliable Nigerian journals, but 1,100 predatory ones. India’s figures are 300 and 4,400. Another 5,800 blacklisted titles claim to be based in Europe or North America but do not provide evidence, such as a valid address. The authors of these papers are often from developing countries, but Western academics have been caught red-handed as well. Many scholars claim to have been duped into using such journals.

The average predatory journal publishes about 50 articles a year, less than half the output of a reliable title, according to Bo-Christer Björk of the Hanken School of Economics in Helsinki. And 60% of papers in such journals receive no future citations, compared with 10% of those in credible ones. Still, that leaves 250,000 questionable articles per year that do get cited.

Scammers tend to have patchy archives and lack transparent policies

Most common blacklisted behaviours, number of journals*

Severe Moderate



*Extrapolated from a random sample of 4,800 journals

Cabells’ guidelines will only start to catch dodgy studies on covid-19 once they

CABELLS GUIDELINES WILL ONLY START TO CATCH DODGY STUDIES ON COVID-19 ONCE THEY appear in predatory journals. But the fact that so many “scholars” use such outlets means that working papers on the disease should face extra-thorough scrutiny. ■

Source: Cabells

This article appeared in the Graphic detail section of the print edition under the headline "Garbage in"

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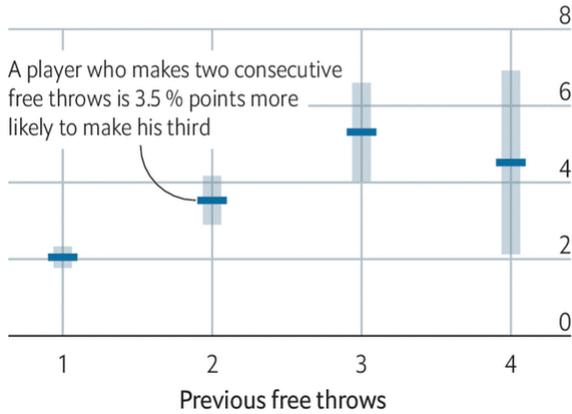
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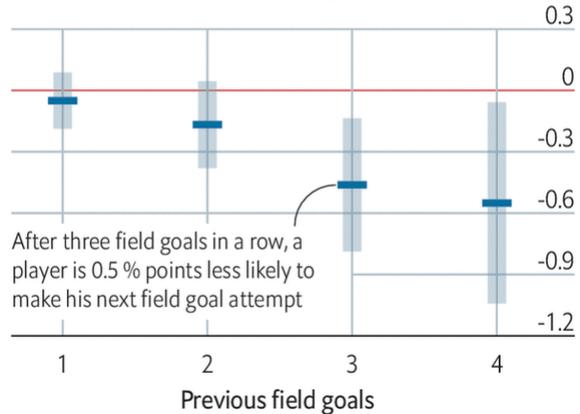
Net gains

Basketball, change in probability of making next free throw or field goal, percentage points
United States, 2004-05 to 2015-16 NBA seasons

By number of previous free throws



By number of previous field goals



Source: "An analysis of the 'hot hand' in NBA field goal and free throw shooting" by R. Lantis and E. Nesson, CEPR, May 2020

The Economist

Daily chart

Success does not always breed success, at least in basketball

GRAPHIC DETAIL

Week in charts

America first



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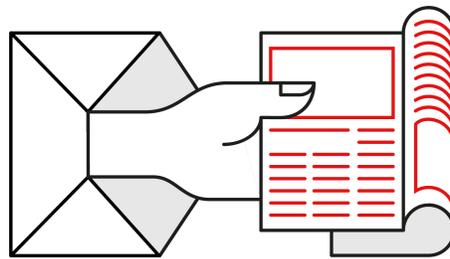
Daily chart

Where is the best place to view
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