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About Predatory Publishing – What It is & How To Recognize It?

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ABSTRACT

This review article is devoted to the concept, history, and methods of recognizing predatory logs. Such journals, as usual, are published in the open-access mode. They are a periodical and claim the status of scientific journals. However, at the heart of these types of journals is a key element of an unfair model of scientific publishing, which involves charging authors of manuscripts without providing full editorial or publishing services (including a full peer review system) accepted in real scientific journals (open and limited access). The article describes the history of the study of the issue, and methods for identifying such publications in order to increase the vigilance of young scientists.

Keywords: scientific publications, scientific journals, publications and citations, predatory journals

Predatory publishing, also write-only publishing [1,2] or deceptive publishing [3], is an exploitative academic publishing business model that involves charging publication fees to authors without checking articles for quality and legitimacy, and without providing editorial and publishing services that legitimate academic journals provide, whether open access or not. The phenomenon of «open access predatory publishers» was first noticed by Jeffrey Beall, when he described «publishers that are ready to publish any article for payment» [4]. However, criticisms about the label «predatory» have been raised [5]. A lengthy review of the controversy started by Beall appears in *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* [6].

Predatory publishers are so regarded because scholars are tricked into publishing with them, although some authors may be aware that the journal is poor quality or even fraudulent but publish in them anyway. New scholars from developing countries are said to be especially at risk of being misled by predatory publishers [8-10]. According to one study, 60% of articles published in predatory journals receive no citations over the five-year period following publication [11,12].

Beall's List, a report that for 5 years was regularly updated by Jeffrey Beall of the University of Colorado until January 2017 [13], set forth criteria for categorizing publications as predatory [14]. A demand by *Frontiers Media* to open a misconduct case against Beall, which was launched by his university and later closed

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with no findings, was one of several reasons Beall may have taken his list offline, but he has not publicly shared his reasoning [13, 15]. After the closure, other efforts to identify predatory publishing have sprouted, such as the paywalled Cabell's blacklist [16], as well as other lists (some based on the original listing by Beall).

In March 2008, Gunther Eysenbach, publisher of an early open-access journal, drew attention to what he called the «black sheep among open access publishers and journals» [17] and highlighted in his blog publishers and journals which resorted to excessive spam to attract authors and editors, criticizing Bentham Science Publishers, Dove Medical Press, and Libertas Academica. In July 2008, Richard Poynder's interview series brought attention to the practices of new publishers who were «better able to exploit the opportunities of the new environment» [18]. Doubts about honesty and scams in a subset of open-access journals continued to be raised in 2009 [19, 20].

Concerns for spamming practices from these journals prompted leading open-access publishers to create the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association in 2008 [21]. In another early precedent, in 2009 the Improbable Research blog found that Scientific Research Publishing's journals duplicated papers already published elsewhere [22]; the case was subsequently reported in Nature [23]. In 2010, Cornell University graduate student Phil Davis (editor of the Scholarly Kitchen blog) submitted a manuscript consisting of computer-generated nonsense (using SCIgen) which was accepted for a fee (but withdrawn by the author) [24]. Predatory publishers have been reported to hold submissions, hostage, refusing to allow them to be withdrawn and thereby preventing submission to another journal [25, 26].

Predatory publishing does not refer to a homogeneous category of practices. The name itself was coined by American librarian Jeffrey Beall who created a list of «deceptive and fraudulent» Open Access (OA) publishers which was used as a reference until withdrawn in 2017. The term has been reused since for a new for-profit database by Cabell's International [16]. On the one hand, Beall's list as well as Cabell's International database do include truly fraudulent and deceptive OA publishers, that pretend to provide services (quality peer review) that they do not implement, show fictive editorial boards and/or ISSN numbers, use dubious marketing and spamming techniques or even hijacking known titles [27]. On the other hand, they also list journals with subpar standards of peer review and linguistic correction [28]. The number of predatory journals thus defined has grown expo-

nentially since 2010 [29, 30]. The demonstration of existing unethical practices in the OA publishing industry also attracted considerable media attention [31].

A 2020 study has found hundreds of scientists say they have reviewed papers for journals termed «predatory» — although they might not know it. An analysis of Publons has found that it hosts at least 6.000 records of reviews for more than 1.000 predatory journals. «The researchers who review most for these titles tend to be young, inexperienced and affiliated with institutions in low-income nations in Africa and the Middle East» [32].

In 2013, John Bohannon, a staff writer for the journal Science and for popular science publications, tested the open access system by submitting to a few such journals a deeply flawed paper on the purported effect of a lichen constituent, and published the results in a paper called, «Who's Afraid of Peer Review?». About 60% of those journals, including journals of Elsevier, SAGE, Wolters Kluwer, and several universities, accepted the faked medical paper. PLOS ONE and Hindawi rejected it [31].

In 2015, four researchers created a fictitious sub-par scientist named Anna O. Szust and applied on her behalf for an editor position in 360 scholarly journals. Szust's qualifications were dismal for the role of an editor; she had never published a single article and had no editorial experience. The books and book chapters listed on her CV were made-up, as were the publishing houses that published the books.

One-third of the journals to which Szust applied were sampled from Beall's List of predatory journals. Forty of these predatory journals accepted Szust as editor without any background vetting and often within days or even hours. By comparison, she received minimal to no positive response from the «control» journals which «must meet certain standards of quality, including ethical publishing practices» [33]. Among journals sampled from the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), 8 of 120 accepted Szust. The DOAJ has since removed some of the affected journals in a 2016 purge. None of the 120 sampled journals listed in Journal Citation Reports (JCR) offered Szust the position [34-36].

SCIgen, a computer program that randomly generates academic computer science papers using context-free grammar, has generated papers that have been accepted by a number of predatory journals as well as predatory conferences.

Recognizing common characteristics of predatory publishers can help to avoid them [44]. Complaints that

are associated with predatory open-access publishing include:

- ✳ Accepting articles quickly with little or no peer review or quality control [45], including hoax and non-sensical papers [24, 46, 47].
- ✳ Notifying academics of article fees only after papers are accepted [45].
- ✳ Aggressively campaigning for academics to submit articles or serve on editorial boards [48].
- ✳ Listing academics as members of editorial boards without their permission [14, 49], and not allowing academics to resign from editorial boards [14, 50].
- ✳ Appointing fake academics to editorial boards [51].
- ✳ Mimicking the name or website style of more established journals [50].
- ✳ Making misleading claims about the publishing operation, such as a false location [14].
- ✳ Using ISSN [14] improperly.
- ✳ Citing fake [52, 53] or non-existent impact factors.
- ✳ Boasting about being «indexed» by academic social networking sites (like ResearchGate) and standard identifiers (like ISSNs and DOIs) as if they were prestigious or reputable bibliographic databases [54].
- ✳ Favoritism and self-promotion in peer review [55].
- ✳ Predatory publishers have also been compared to vanity presses [56, 57].

In 2015, Jeffrey Beall used 26 criteria related to poor journal standards and practices, 9 related to journal editors and staff members, 7 related to ethics and integrity, 6 related to the publisher's business practices, and 6 «other» general criteria related to publishers [58]. He also listed 26 additional practices, which were 'reflective of poor journal standards' and were not necessarily indicative of predatory behaviour.

In 2016, researchers Stefan Eriksson and Gert Helgesson identified 25 signs of predatory publishing [59]. They warn that a journal will not necessarily be predatory if they meet one of the criteria, «but the more points on the list that apply to the journal at hand, the more sceptical you should be». The full list is quoted below:

1. The publisher is not a member of any recognized professional organisation committed to best publishing practices (like COPE or EASE).
2. The journal is not indexed in well-established electronic databases (like MEDLINE or Web of Science).
3. The publisher claims to be a «leading publisher» even though it just got started.
4. The journal and the publisher are unfamiliar to you and all your colleagues.

5. The papers of the journal are of poor research quality, and may not be academic at all (for instance allowing for obvious pseudo-science).

6. There are fundamental errors in the titles and abstracts, or frequent and repeated typographical or factual errors throughout the published papers.

7. The journal website is not professional.

8. The journal website does not present an editorial board or gives insufficient detail on names and affiliations.

9. The journal website does not reveal the journal's editorial office location or uses an incorrect address.

10. The publishing schedule is not clearly stated.

11. The journal title claims a national affiliation that does not match its location (such as «American Journal of ...» while being located on another continent) or includes «International» in its title while having a single-country editorial board.

12. The journal mimics another journal title or the website of said journal.

13. The journal provides an impact factor in spite of the fact that the journal is new (which means that the impact cannot yet be calculated).

14. The journal claims an unrealistically high impact based on spurious alternative impact factors (such as 7 for a bioethics journal, which is far beyond the top notation).

15. The journal website posts non-related or non-academic advertisements.

16. The publisher of the journal has released an overwhelmingly large suite of new journals on one occasion or during a very short period of time.

17. The editor-in-chief of the journal is editor in chief also for other journals with widely different focus.

18. The journal includes articles (very far) outside its stated scope.

19. The journal sends you an unsolicited invitation to submit an article for publication while making it blatantly clear that the editor has absolutely no idea about your field of expertise.

20. Emails from the journal editor are written in the poor language, include exaggerated flattering (everyone is a leading profile in the field), and make contradictory claims (such as «You have to respond within 48 h» while later on saying «You may submit your manuscript whenever you find convenient»).

21. The journal charges a submission or handling fee, instead of a publication fee (which means that you have to pay even if the paper is not accepted for publication).

22. The types of submission/publication fees and what they amount to are not clearly stated on the journal's website.

23. The journal gives unrealistic promises regarding the speed of the peer review process (hinting that the journal's peer review process is minimal or non-existent) —or boasts an equally unrealistic track-record.

24. The journal does not describe copyright agreements clearly or demands the copyright of the paper while claiming to be an open access journal.

25. The journal displays no strategies for how to handle misconduct, conflicts of interest, or secure the archiving of articles when no longer in operation.

26. A user friendly web base interface is available [60].

Predatory journals have rapidly increased their publication volumes from 53.000 in 2010 to an estimated 420.000 articles in 2014, published by around 8.000 active journals [29, 61]. Early on, publishers with more than 100 journals dominated the market, but since 2012 publishers in the 10–99 journal size category have captured the largest market share. As of 2022, almost one-third of the 100 largest publishers (by journal count) could be deemed predatory [62]. The regional distribution of both the publisher's country and authorship is highly skewed, with three-quarters of the authors from Asia or Africa [29]. Authors paid an average fee of US \$178 each for articles to be published rapidly without review, typically within 2 to 3 months of submission [29]. As reported in 2019, some 5% of Italian researchers have published in predatory journals, with a third of those journals engaging in fraudulent editorial practices [63].

The root cause of exploitative practices is the author-facing an article-processing charge (APC) business model, in which authors are charged to publish rather than to read [64]. Such a model provides incentives for publishers to focus on the quantity of articles published, rather than their quality. APCs have gained increasing popularity in the last two decades as a business model for OA, due to the guaranteed revenue streams they offer, as well as a lack of competitive pricing within the OA market, which allows vendors full control over how much they choose to charge [65].

Ultimately, quality control relies on good editorial policies and their enforcement, and the conflict between rigorous scholarship and profit can be successfully managed by selecting which articles are published purely based on (peer-reviewed) methodological quality [66]. Most OA publishers ensure their quality by regis-

tering their titles in the Directory of Open Access Journals and complying with a standardised set of conditions [67]. A recent study has shown that Beall's criteria of «predatory» publishing were in no way limited to OA publishers and that, applying them to both OA and non-OA journals in the field of library and information science, even top-tier non-OA journals could be qualified as predatory.

The majority of predatory OA publishers and authors publishing in these appear to be based in Asia and Africa, as well as Europe and the Americas [70-72]. It has been argued that authors who publish in predatory journals may do so unwittingly without actual unethical perspective, due to concerns that North American and European journals might be prejudiced against scholars from non-Western countries, high publication pressure or lack of research proficiency [10, 73]. Hence predatory publishing also questions the geopolitical and commercial context of scholarly knowledge production. More generally, the criteria adopted by high JIF journals, including the quality of the English language, the composition of the editorial board or the rigour of the peer review process itself tend to favour familiar content from the "centre" rather than the «periphery» [75]. It is thus important to distinguish between exploitative publishers and journals – whether OA or not – and legitimate OA initiatives with varying standards in digital publishing, but which may improve and disseminate epistemic contents [76].

University of Colorado Denver librarian and researcher Jeffrey Beall, who coined the term «predatory publishing», first published his list of predatory publishers in 2010 [48]. Beall's list of potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publishers attempted to identify scholarly open-access publishers with questionable practices [78]. In 2013, Nature reported that Beall's list and website were «widely read by librarians, researchers, and open-access advocates, many of whom applaud his efforts to reveal shady publishing practices» [48]. Others have raised the objection that «(w)hether it's fair to classify all these journals and publishers as 'predatory' is an open question—several shades of gray may be distinguishable» [79].

Beall's analyses have been called sweeping generalizations with no supporting evidence [80], and he has also been criticized for being biased against open-access journals from less economically developed countries [81]. One librarian wrote that Beall's list «attempts a binary division of this complex gold rush: the good and the bad. Yet many of the criteria used are either impossible to quantify..., or can be found to apply as often to estab-

lished OA journals as to the new entrants in this area... Some of the criteria seem to make First World assumptions that aren't valid worldwide» [82]. Beall differed with these opinions and wrote a letter of rebuttal in mid-2015 [83].

Following the *Who's Afraid of Peer Review?* investigation, the DOAJ has tightened up its inclusion criteria, with the purpose of serving as a whitelist, very much like Beall's has been a blacklist [84]. The investigation found that «the results show that Beall is good at spotting publishers with poor quality control» [31]. However, the managing director of DOAJ, Lars Bjørnshauge, estimates that questionable publishing probably accounts for fewer than 1% of all author-pays, open-access papers, a proportion far lower than Beall's estimate of 5–10%. Instead of relying on «blacklists», Bjørnshauge argues that open-access associations such as the DOAJ and the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association should adopt more responsibility for policing publishers: they should lay out a set of criteria that publishers and journals must comply with to win a place on a «whitelist» indicating that they are trustworthy [48].

Beall has been threatened with a lawsuit by a Canadian publisher which appears on the list. He reports that he has been the subject of online harassment for his work on the subject. His list has been criticized [85] for relying heavily on analysis of publishers' websites, not engaging directly with publishers, and including newly founded but legitimate journals. Beall has responded to these complaints by posting the criteria he uses to generate the list, as well as instituting an anonymous three-person review body to which publishers can appeal to be removed from the list [48]. For example, a 2010 re-evaluation resulted in some journals being removed from Beall's list [48].

At the May 2017 meeting of the Society for Scholarly Publishing, Cabell's International, a company that offers scholarly publishing analytics and other scholarly services, announced that it intended to launch a blacklist of predatory journals (not publishers) in June, and said that access would be by subscription only [16]. The company started work on its blacklist criteria in early 2016 [97]. In July 2017, both a blacklist and a whitelist were offered for subscription on their website [97].

More transparent peer review, such as open peer review and post-publication peer review, has been advocated to combat predatory journals [108, 109]. Others have argued instead that the discussion on predatory journals should not be turned «into a debate over the

shortcomings of peer review—it is nothing of the sort. It is about fraud, deception, and irresponsibility...» [110].

In an effort to «set apart legitimate journals and publishers from non-legitimate ones», principles of transparency and best practice have been identified and issued collectively by the Committee on Publication Ethics, the DOAJ, the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association, and the World Association of Medical Editors [111]. Various journal review websites (crowd-sourced or expert-run) have been started, some focusing on the quality of the peer review process and extending to non-OA publications [112, 113]. A group of libraries and publishers launched an awareness campaign [114, 115].

A number of measures have been suggested to further combat predatory journals. Others have called on research institutions to improve publication literacy notably among junior researchers in developing countries [116]. Some organisations have also developed criteria in which predatory publishers could be spotted through providing tips [117].

As Beall has ascribed predatory publishing to a consequence of gold open access (particularly its author-pay variant) [118], one researcher has argued for platinum open access, where the absence of article processing charges removes the publisher's conflict of interest in accepting article submissions [119]. More objective discriminating metrics [120] have been proposed, such as a "predatory score" [121] and positive and negative journal quality indicators [122].

Bioethicist Arthur Caplan has warned that predatory publishing, fabricated data, and academic plagiarism erodes public confidence in the medical profession, devalues legitimate science, and undermines public support for evidence-based policy [125].

In 2015, Rick Anderson, associate dean in the J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, challenged the term itself: «What do we mean when we say 'predatory,' and is that term even still useful?... This question has become relevant because of that common refrain heard among Beall's critics: that he only examines one kind of predation—the kind that naturally crops up in the context of author-pays OA.» Anderson suggests that the term «predatory» be retired in the context of scholarly publishing. «It's a nice, attention-grabbing word, but I'm not sure it's helpfully descriptive... it generates more heat than light» [126]. A 2017 article in *The New York Times* suggests that a significant number of academics are «eager» to publish their work in these journals, making the relationship more a «new and ugly symbiosis»

than a case of scholars being exploited by «predators» [7].

Similarly, a study published in January 2018 found that «Scholars in the developing world felt that reputable Western journals might be prejudiced against them and sometimes felt more comfortable publishing in journals from the developing world. Other scholars were unaware of the reputation of the journals in which they published and would not have selected them had they known. However, some scholars said they would still have published in the same journals if their institutions recognised them. The pressure to 'publish or perish' was another factor influencing many scholars' decisions to publish in these fast-turnaround journals. In some cases, researchers did not have adequate guidance and felt they lacked the knowledge of research to submit to a more reputable journal» [10].

In May 2018, the University Grants Commission in India removed 4,305 dubious journals from a list of publications used for evaluating academic performance [127-129].

To further define and distinguish predatory journals, Leonhard Dobusch and Maximilian Heimstädt in 2019 proposed a tripartite classification of Open Access journals with below-average peer review quality [130]. Based on their procedures, there would be «aspirant», «junk» and «fake» journals.

While aspirant journals are science-oriented despite their below-average peer review (e.g. student-run journals), junk and fake journals are predominantly or exclusively profit-oriented. Junk and fake Open Access journals have superficial or no peer review procedures, despite their claims of being peer-reviewed.

In April, 2019, 43 participants from 10 countries met in Ottawa, Canada to formulate a consensus definition: «Predatory journals and publishers are entities 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» [131]. The adequacy of the peer review was not included in the definition because this factor was deemed too subjective to evaluate [131]. Critics of this definition argued that excluding the quality of peer review from the definition «could strengthen rather than weaken» predatory journals [132].

In March 2022, the InterAcademy Partnership published a report, *Combatting Predatory Academic Journals*

and *Conferences*, with a series of recommendations [133].

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