

“Predatory” publishers: to recognize them is to avoid them

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Abstract

Predatory publishers, characterised by unscholarly publishing practices, affect all authors and librarians around the globe. These publishers try to exploit the Open Access movement for their own economic interests, soliciting a fee to publish without meeting scholarly publishing standards. Even though this phenomenon has been widespread for several years, there are still many authors who are not sufficiently familiar with this problem. In this article, we discuss the recent initiatives related to the most important tools to help them to recognize and avoid predatory publishers.

Key words: publications; open access publishing; predatory publishing.

Introduction

More and more often, researchers find themselves having to deal with publication offers, or requests of being part of editorial advisory boards, by publishers that turn out to be unreliable, so-called "predatory publishers". These publishers try to exploit the Open Access movement for their own economic interests, soliciting a fee to publish (the so-called APCs, Article Processing Charges) without meeting scholarly publishing standards. Although these publishers mimic the structure of legitimate journals they don't conduct a proper peer review and don't follow standard policies issued by international organisations, such as the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), regarding fundamental issues including archiving of journal content or transparency of journal publishing fees (1). They often employ a variety of unethical promotional tactics, ranging from the fraudulent use of the names of established journals, creating what are called "Hijacked journals", to the failure to identify editors and board members, from offering fake editing services to misleading claims about index coverage or citation impact.

One of the most recognizable features of predatory publishing is the utilisation of aggressive spam invitations to solicit manuscripts, membership on a journal's editorial board, a participation in a conference or a peer review, with persuasive and misleading messages (2).

These spam emails are nowadays aided by the ease of gathering author information from PubMed/Medline (3), are usually written in ungrammatical and error-filled English and promise fast publication at super discounted prices, while simulating a reputation through the use of fraudulent or non-existent impact factors (4). The frustration many scientists have felt at the volume of these solicitations was immortalised in the article "Get me off your [obscenity] mailing list" (5), which was presented for publication on the International Journal of Advanced Computer Technology by two researchers tired of receiving emails with insistent invitations to publish in that journal. To their amazement, the article, consisting only of that sentence, was defined as "excellent" and accepted for publication, and then not published only because, obviously, the authors did not want to pay the required publication fees (6).

Even though this is a phenomenon dating back several years, a general definition of these publishers and journals was not made until 2019. This general definition was formulated by 43 participants representing publishing societies, research funders, researchers, policymakers, academic institutions, libraries and patient advocates in 10 countries at a conference held in Ottawa: "Predatory journals and publishers are entities which prioritise self-interest at the expense of scholarship and are characterised by false or misleading information, deviation from best editorial and publishing

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practices, lack of transparency, and/or the use of aggressive and indiscriminate solicitation practices". With this definition, the main characteristics of predatory journals can be reduced to four criteria: the presence of false and misleading information on their web sites, deviation from editorial and publishing standards, lack of transparency, and aggressive and indiscriminate demands (7). This definition encountered some criticism as the consensus group controversially omitted the quality of peer review as a criterion.

In the last few years these publishers have gained more and more publishing market share by exploiting the pressure on researchers to publish as much as possible (the famous principle of "publish or perish" of most research evaluation systems) for career advancement and especially to obtain certain tenure-track positions.

Why it is important to identify predatory publishers

The impact of predatory practices is still debated: some have argued that the degree to which predatory journals are harmful to research is exaggerated because the majority of papers published in them are rarely, if at all, cited (8, 9), and that only poor research tends to be published in them.

However, it is important to underline that this kind of publishing without an effective peer review can be harmful, especially for health sciences, not only for those who publish, who can be "branded" by having published in a predatory journal, but also to readers (expert and otherwise), who can be misled by research results without any scientific value (10).

As well as being a potential threat to people's health, predatory journals may reduce the credibility of the scientific literature as low-quality studies can be published and made available online, disguised as properly peer-reviewed papers (11). Such journals can provide easily accessible platforms for fake science or pseudoscience and conspiracy theories to thrive e.g. climate change denial or anti-vaccination alarmism, which can subsequently be referenced by journalists with little knowledge of the phenomenon of predatory journals and by activists. Identifying such journals is important for all involved in scientific publishing, authors, researchers, peer reviewers, and editors, because scientific work that is not properly assessed should not contribute to the scientific record.

In addition, we should not forget that the whole enterprise is organised around collecting money from researchers, and ultimately from research funders, which would be better used elsewhere.

Watchlists and safelists

Although predatory publishing is now a well-established phenomenon, not all researchers are familiar enough with it to navigate the situations that may arise, and there have been a number of efforts to provide them with the necessary practical information. These include, among the others, "watchlists", "safelists", checklists, guides, training, institutional, and national policies and regulations (12).

In the area of watchlists and safelists, which form a complementary pair, two substantial efforts to aid authors in distinguishing predatory from legitimate journals include the now discontinued Beall's List and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Until January 2017, many researchers referred to "Beall's List of potential predatory journals and publishers" as a reference point for identifying possible predatory publishers and related journals. The list, published and regularly updated on the blog "Scholarly Open Access: critical analysis of scholarly open-access publishing", was maintained by Jeffrey Beall, a librarian at the University of Colorado who introduced the predatory journal concept to the literature for the first time in 2010 (13). In spite of being widely used, the list was controversial, and was widely criticised for a lack of transparency or consistently applied criteria, which some critics felt included a tendency to consider open-access publishing as a whole (or at least the use of Article Processing Charges) as tantamount to predatory publishing; in 2017 Beall's List was taken offline permanently (14). To fill the vacuum created by the shutdown of Beall's lists and blog, a company that offers scholarly publishing analytics and other scholarly services named Cabell's created a database of predatory journals and good journals in the form of a watchlist (Predatory Reports) and a safelist (Journalalytics). However, access to these lists requires a paid subscription (15, 16). Beall's List has also reappeared on the web in another form: a European researcher, who intends to work anonymously (given the threats Jeffrey Beall received from publishers), decided to retrieve a copy of the list and update it with separate notes; this list is freely avail-

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able on the web (17). It is possible to find other copies of the Beall's list on the web but the peculiarity of this version is that it is not an unchanged copy of its latest version before the site was definitively deleted, as its editor has undertaken to update it (even if not as often as Beall, as he himself admits). Another distinctive feature of this version of Beall's list is that its editor does not just update it (more or less) regularly but also provides a collection of resources intended to help readers develop a capacity to make accurate assessments on their own.

The Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) can be considered as a “safelist” as it has the purpose of identifying legitimate open access journals. To date (March 2022) this community-curated website lists more than 17,500 peer-reviewed Open Access journals covering all areas of science, technology, medicine, social sciences, arts and humanities and is considered the most trustworthy source of reliable open access journals.

These “watchlists” and “safelists” endeavouring to separate good practices from bad ones can fail to address the complexity of the predatory publishers’ phenomenon and risk disadvantaging less-established journals. It is possible to use these lists as a starting point but, as the scholarly publishing landscape is changing quite fast, it is important to underline that lists can quickly become outdated. It is therefore also desirable for authors to familiarise themselves with the common and identifying characteristics of predatory journals in order to recognize and avoid them.

Checklists

One approach going in the direction of a greater awareness of the phenomenon by authors themselves is the “Think. Check. Submit” checklist developed by a coalition of scholarly publishing organisations. This checklist includes a number of simple questions authors should ask themselves before submitting a manuscript in order to evaluate the credentials of a journal or the society or publisher behind it. It is available in nearly 40 languages.

On the Internet, there are many suggestions on the checks to be done before submitting a manuscript to a publisher who may not be completely reliable. These self-help checklists of typical characteristics or traits of predatory journals, even if they require more time to get acquainted with, can be helpful to identify trusted jour-

nals in which to publish. On the other hand, their number can be overwhelming to authors so it is advisable that in the near future there will be a consensus to create a gold standard checklist serving authors from all disciplines (18, 19).

Some of the common features which appear consistently in these checklists, according to Cukier, S. et al. (18) are: titles may be quite similar to those of conventional journals already known in the field; editorial boards may not exist; there is an obvious lack of transparency in the manuscript editing process; papers are poorly copy-edited; publication times are very short; inadequate or no information on publishing costs is provided; the journal's website or solicitation emails are unprofessional, with spelling, typographical, or grammatical errors; the journals claim in emails to be indexed in well-known and high-quality databases, such as Medline, Scopus, and Journal Citation Reports but that information cannot be found on their websites; attractive but false impact metrics are provided; the publication has no clear ethics policy.

Conclusions

In the last few years predatory publishers (not to be confused with the ones that publish legitimate, indexed, peer-reviewed journals using author-pay financial models to underwrite journal peer review, processing, and publication costs) have become a threat to the integrity of scientific publishing; information helping authors to recognize and avoid them is the main response available at the moment. Many resources have been and continue to be created to support this, to the point where it can be challenging to identify which are most useful, and some effort at coordination may be needed.

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