

# Navigating the publishing trap: safeguarding researchers from predatory practices

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### Abstract

*This paper describes the motivation, development and results of the workshop “Spotting sharks in the ocean of academic publishing: how to steer clear of predatory behaviour”. The workshop was developed in response to questions from researchers who had published in a journal that later turned out to be unreliable or who questioned a journal’s quality when selecting a publication venue. The goal is to teach researchers how to make the distinction between reliable and untrustworthy journals and reduce distrust of new or smaller publishers. The session was developed at KU Leuven and then adapted for presentation at the EAHIL conference. It provided valuable insights into raising awareness, fostering collaboration among research support staff, and strengthening trust in the publishing landscape.*

**Key words:** predatory publishing; open access; research support; scholarly communication; awareness training.

### Motivation and development of the workshop

Research support staff at KU Leuven have noticed a growing number of inquiries about how to identify trustworthy publication venues, both prior to selecting a journal and after encountering issues with an unreliable one. Journals or publishers that engage in predatory or unethical practices take advantage of the academic publishing system without providing the editorial oversight or quality control you would expect from legitimate scholarly outlets. Rather than focusing on sharing credible and rigorous research, they often prioritize other goals, most notably financial gain (1). Therefore, the research support staff at KU Leuven developed the workshop “Spotting sharks in the ocean of academic publishing: how to steer clear of predatory behaviour”. The workshop helps researchers recognize and avoid predatory publishing practices, while also raising awareness, breaking the taboo around the topic, and encouraging open communication with peers. Its main goal is to support researchers in choosing suitable journals and to increase understanding of the wide

range of unethical publishing practices. The idea behind it is that journals and publishers are rarely entirely good or bad; many operate in a gray zone, with both positive and questionable characteristics. In addition, being able to recognize predatory publishing practices can also help when evaluating literature you plan to use in your own research. While the current workshop does not focus on this aspect, learning to spot suspicious journal or publisher characteristics can already make a valuable contribution.

Additionally, there has been a growing distrust towards publishers with a damaged reputation (2, 3). For example, journals or publishers that have been black-listed, or discredited for unethical publishing practices. It is difficult for such publishers to recover, as distrust often persists long after they have improved their policies (4). This distrust also extends to smaller, lesser-known or new journals, significantly reducing their chances of gaining a place in the scientific publishing landscape.

Therefore, it is important to teach researchers how to critically evaluate journals instead of relying on static

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lists (e.g. Beals list only updated about every four years; MIAR updated once a year) that try to make decisions for them. At the same time, fostering trust in smaller and newer publishers is essential, reminding researchers that reputation is shaped by more than just journal metrics.

This leads to a paradox: while researchers are rightly cautious when choosing a publication venue, their reluctance leads to the growing dominance of a select group of large and powerful publishers (5). As a result, bibliodiversity is undermined and hinders the development of new open access initiatives (6).

The rapid rise of artificial intelligence further complicates this situation. The sharp increase in automatically generated publications in paper mills is blurring the lines between reliable and unreliable even more (7).

In this context, there is a growing need for clear guidance for researchers when selecting publication venues.

### Set-up and content of the workshop

*The original workshop at KU Leuven*

The original workshop was developed for researchers at various stages of their research careers and is structured into four main parts.

It starts with a theoretical part led by the lecturer, introducing the concept of predatory publication practices and outlining their typical characteristics. This foundation helps researchers learn how to recognize warning signs and avoid falling victim to such practices. Unethical publication practices do not prioritize the quality of research output and use deceptive tactics such as active, or even aggressive, recruitment emails, rapid publication without peer review, requesting the inclusion of irrelevant references, adding fake or irrelevant co-authors, identity theft and even extortion (1). These kinds of practices undermine the integrity of scholarly communication and pose a serious threat to the credibility of research.

Secondly, participants are introduced to resources, quality labels, and tools that help researchers evaluate whether a journal or publisher is trustworthy, or that provide guidelines to support transparency, integrity, and ethical standards in scholarly publishing.

Resources:

- *ISSN Portal* (<https://portal.issn.org/>): the International Standard Serial Number (ISSN) provides a unique code for a publishing platform. Each page

is enriched with additional metadata (e.g. publisher, country, indexing status, subject, medium). By consulting the ISSN portal, researchers can check whether the journal has a valid ISSN;

- *Information Matrix for the Analysis of Journals* (MIAR, <https://miar.ub.edu/>): MIAR aggregates data from over 100 sources (journal directories, international indexing databases and abstracting databases). Its goal is to help identify reputable journals by assessing their presence across these sources. To be included in MIAR, a journal must appear in at least one of the sources analyzed. If a journal is not indexed in any of the sources MIAR has checked, this raises the critical question of why this is the case. In such cases, the journal is likely to be poorly discoverable, which in turn means your publication may also be difficult to find, ultimately diminishing the visibility and impact of your research output;
- *Academic databases* (e.g. Web of Science (Clarivate), Scopus (Elsevier), Medline (National Library of Medicine), PubMed Central (National Library of Medicine)): verifying the indexing of journals in the major academic databases is an important check. Each database has specific criteria that must be met before journals, books or conference proceedings can be indexed. Examples of such criteria are peer review, editorial quality, ethical publishing practices, regular publication, international relevance, and technical standards for metadata and accessibility. In this way, such databases serve as a form of quality assurance: being indexed in one or more of the major databases signals the credibility and reliability of a journal, book or conference proceeding;
- *Directory of Open Access Journals* (DOAJ, <https://doaj.org/>): the DOAJ is a database of peer-reviewed, fully open access journals in over 80 languages. This database provides quality assurance for open access publishing, helping researchers find reliable publishing platforms. Note: If a journal is not indexed in the major databases or one of the other above-mentioned resources, this does not necessarily mean it is unreliable. It may simply be a very new journal that has yet to build its reputation required for inclusion;
- *Blacklists* (e.g. Beall's list of Potential Predatory Journals and Publishers, <https://beallslist.net/>): Op-

tionally, so-called “blacklists” can be consulted when forming an opinion about a publishing platform. Blacklists contain journals accused of potentially unethical or predatory practices. Journals appearing on such lists are typically scrutinized for issues such as lack of transparency, weak or absent peer review, and misleading metrics. However, blacklists rarely provide detailed justification for including a publisher or journal. Therefore, researchers must independently verify whether a journal truly engages in predatory behavior. These blacklists have been criticized for potential bias (8). Moreover, the rapidly evolving publishing landscape makes it difficult to keep such static lists up to date.

Additionally, it is possible to check whether a publishing platform has ethical quality labels. Quality labels:

- *Committee on Publication Ethics* (COPE, <https://publicationethics.org/>): COPE is committed to training and supporting editors, publishers, universities, research institutes, and anyone involved in publication ethics. Membership in COPE demonstrates that journals, publishers, organizations, universities or research institutes intend to adhere to the highest standards of publication ethics and apply the COPE Principles of Publication Ethics, as outlined in the Core Practices. When publishing platforms apply for membership, they are evaluated and must meet a set of minimum criteria to be approved as a COPE member;
- *Open Access Scholarly Publishing Association* (OASPA, <https://oaspa.org/>): OASPA is a diverse community of academic and professional publishers engaged in open scholarship. Approved members have undergone a rigorous review process and have pledged to adhere to OASPA's Code of Conduct.

Specific tools:

- *Think. Check. Submit.* (<https://thinkchecksubmit.org/>): this webtool provides checklists that researchers can use to identify trustworthy journals and books.

While a variety of tools and resources exist to help researchers assess the credibility of journals and publishers, it is important to recognize that no single tool offers a definitive answer. The identification of predat-

tory practices is inherently complex and often context-dependent. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to adopt a multifaceted approach, drawing on multiple sources of information rather than relying on one checklist or database. The publishing landscape changes rapidly, and it is difficult to keep a list, tool, or index up to date. Most of the tools mentioned above are updated regularly, with each noticing important changes at different times. Combining them maximizes the chance of detecting these changes. In this regard, the InterAcademy Partnership (IAP) spectrum approach (9) provides a valuable framework. Rather than categorizing journals in binary terms, it outlines a continuum of characteristics across three categories: fraudulent and deceptive journals, low-quality journals, and quality journals. By comparing the traits of a given journal with those described in each category, researchers can make a more informed and balanced judgment about its reliability and scholarly value.

The third part of the workshop focuses on real-world examples. Presenting actual cases of unethical and predatory publishing practices that have affected KU Leuven researchers demonstrates to participants that these issues are not just theoretical. They are real and have impacted colleagues within their own institution. Moreover, it can help break the taboo that still surrounds this topic. Many researchers find it difficult to admit that they may have fallen into one of the publishing traps, as this often comes with a sense of embarrassment or shame. Sharing such examples therefore helps to raise awareness and encourages more open and supportive discussion.

Finally, participants are presented with hands-on exercises so they can practice how to use the resources, quality labels, and tools to reach a well-informed decision about whether or not to publish in their case journal. The cases are deliberately diverse: some journals are clearly unreliable, others were clearly reliable, however, a large proportion of the cases falls within the gray area. Researchers are encouraged to think critically, experience that it is crucial to use several of the tools and resources simultaneously and ask for advice when in doubt.

#### *The EAHIL adaptation of the workshop*

For the 2025 EAHIL conference in Łódź, the original KU Leuven workshop was tailored to suit an interna-

tional audience of research support staff and librarians. The focus was primarily on sharing experiences, collaboration, and developing strategies to better support researchers in navigating the publishing landscape. For the EAHIL conference, the last two sections of the original workshop, which focused on practical examples and exercises, were replaced by a “case market”. During this session, participants worked in small groups to analyze cases and challenges encountered by research support staff. Within their groups, participants could share experiences, offer advice and explore preferred solutions. The session concluded with a collaborative discussion, where participants shared insights and best practices. In this way, the workshop aimed to raise awareness of red flags indicating predatory behavior in journals, to equip support staff with strategies to train researchers in evaluating journals using reliable tools and resources, and to build confidence in advising researchers by sharing strategies and experiences with colleagues. Overall, the workshop sought to develop best practices for rebuilding trust in academic publishing. The EAHIL edition generated valuable feedback. All participants supported the approach of the original KU Leuven workshop and emphasized the importance of raising awareness among researchers about predatory publishing practices. Furthermore, the importance of clear and effective communication within institutions was emphasized, so that researchers know who to contact if they have concerns about a journal or receive suspicious invitations. Another key insight was the importance of involving researchers directly in journal evaluations. Rather than conducting assessments on their behalf, support teams should empower researchers. This can be achieved by teaching researchers how to conduct such an evaluation themselves or by providing researchers with information to help them make their own well-informed decisions. Finally, participants suggested offering short information sessions or checklists to help researchers know where to find support.

### Conclusions

The workshop “Spotting sharks in the ocean of academic publishing: how to steer clear of predatory behaviour” made it clear that predatory publishing is not only a problem of deception, but also a problem of trust.

While the focus on predatory publishing practices has promoted useful vigilance, it has also fostered unintended distrust of smaller or newer journals. This calls for a nuanced approach that not only protects researchers but also teaches them how to make independent judgments.

Through practical examples and exercises, the use of reliable tools and resources, and exchanges between support staff and researchers, this workshop helps researchers recognize and avoid predatory publishing practices, while also raising awareness, breaking the taboo around the topic, and encouraging open communication with peers. In this way, researchers are supported in selecting suitable journals and in increasing their understanding of the wide range of unethical publishing practices. Open communication and raising awareness are the best weapons against predatory and unethical publishing practices.

### Acknowledgements

The authors of this paper received the EAHIL award in the best workshop category at the EAHIL 2025 workshop, “Imagine”, Łódź, Poland, 11-13 June 2025.

*Submitted on invitation.*

*Accepted on 17 November 2025.*

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