Predatory Publishing, Open Access, and the Costs to Academia

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ABSTRACT As publishing demands increase, so does the availability of open access predatory publishing options masquerading as reputable peer-review outlets. This article cautions against the broader consequences of predatory publishing and suggests means to control their influence.

Peer-reviewed, open access (OA) journals provide the potential for wider dissemination of research, with the number of articles published in these outlets expected to increase by 20% to 30% each year (*The Scientist* 2012). Perceptual biases against these outlets endure due in part to confusion about the distinction of Gold versus Green open access,[1] as well as that many OA journals charge to cover operating costs. A greater challenge to OA journals is due to what librarian Jeffrey Beall coined as "predatory open access": that is, publication outlets masquerading as peer-reviewed.[2] The primary goal of these outlets is profit maximization, providing no substantive peer review and—unlike reputable OA journals—fees are rarely stated until after an article has been submitted. The number of predatory journals has increased rapidly, with Beall's own list of predatory publishers (i.e., the Beall List) increasing from 18 in 2011 to 693 in January 2015, with a similar proliferation of standalone journals. Admittedly, this list is imperfect, often failing to distinguish between malicious intentions and amateur design features (Berger and Cirasella 2015; Crawford 2014). However, as the mantra of "publish or perish" increasingly extends beyond research universities, so does the influence of predatory publishers.

Other scholars pointed out the subpar standards of predatory publishers by submitting computer-generated papers with humorous pseudonyms for the authors (Freely et al. 2014; Perry 2015; Utomo 2012)—papers that repeat a seven-word rant against the journal itself (Mazieres and Kohler ND) and a poem about ulcerative colitis (Narang 2014). Bohannon's study, "Who's Afraid of Peer Review?," submitted the same article claiming a discovery of a new cancer drug (without supporting evidence) to 255 open source journals; 82% of those on Beall's List of predatory journals accepted the paper (Bohannon 2013; see also Spears 2014a). Although these cases range from humorous to alarming, the broader challenges arising from the proliferation of predatory journals deserves closer examination.

PREYING ON IGNORANCE

Predatory publishers prey on the naïve, often providing news about their acceptance—usually in less than two weeks—before revealing publication costs. Xia et al. (2015) found that these predatory journals largely attract young researchers from developing countries who are likely to be ignorant of publication standards. This naivety also is common among graduate students outside of research-oriented programs, where advice from faculty on where to publish often is lacking. Parallels are evident between predatory publishers and the Nigerian e-mail scam in that the poorly constructed façade attempted to attract only the most naïve, culling those likely to waste a publisher's time (Herley 2012). Furthermore, although some of these journals have published articles without the requested fee (Beall 2015a; Kolata 2013), more commonly, the predatory publisher demands an additional fee to retract the article (Beall 2015c).

I recently tested the credibility of an offer from the *Review of History and Political Science*[3] because its publishing company website, American Research Institute for Policy Development (ARIPD),[4] appeared comparatively more professional than many other offers.[5] To test their peer-review standards, I formatted the lyrics to Justin Timberlake's 2006 hit song, "SexyBack," into paragraph form, copying it 32 times to replicate the length of an article.[6] Three weeks later, my paper was accepted, along with how to submit the previously unmentioned $200 "publication processing fee." The reviewer notes I received stated that my literature review was adequate (despite no citations or acknowledgment of Mr. Timberlake's contribution to the paper), that my work "will undoubtedly contribute to the field of contemporary research," that "it follows the basic principles of good research," and that, ironically, "there is a good consistency in the paper."

Whereas many of the published works even from a cursory view are subpar, examples abound in which scholars—likely inadvertently—submitted seemingly quality work to a predatory publisher. The problem is exacerbated by journals that frequently and intentionally adopt similar titles to prestigious outlets and develop professional websites similar to reputable OA journals. Suggesting that the journal is based in the United States further implies legitimacy. Crawford (2014, 17), for example, found 287 examples on the Beall List of "America Journal of"—more than double for the number of other regional titles.

Hijacked journals present a similar problem, in which predatory publishers copy the name of an established peer-review journal (e.g., Butler 2013) or in other ways take over reputable outlets. For example, *Experimental & Clinical Cardiology* was sold in 2013 and then published 142 articles in one month with little to no editing (Spears 2014b). Predatory hijacking further creates

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reputational risks for those listed on editorial boards—people who often unwittingly agree to join the board or are holdovers from before a sale and are rarely removed even after complaints (e.g., Kolata 2013). Other hijackers entirely fabricate editorial boards.

Finally, by portraying themselves as peer-reviewed, predatory publishers risk damaging the integrity of academia, precisely at a time when social-science funding increasingly is in jeopardy.

OTHER PROBLEMS

The broader ramifications of predatory outlets receive less attention. Whereas the focus is often on the publisher, unscrupulous people can manipulate these outlets for their own gain. Traditionally, peer-reviewed journals play the role of gatekeeper, signaling that the accepted work makes a scholarly contribution and assisting indirectly in the evaluation of hiring and tenure decisions. The rise of predatory journals complicates this process (e.g., Kolata 2013)—not only by creating confusion between similarly titled peer-reviewed and predatory journals but also by individuals using these outlets to inflate their publication count, especially when a threshold (e.g., three articles) all but ensures tenure. OA journals traditionally are cited more than those behind a "pay wall" (e.g., Antelman 2004; Craig et al. 2007; Lawrence 2001), although the social sciences see less of a bump. The rise of Google Scholar metrics, which—unlike the Institute for Scientific Information—makes no effort to evaluate journal quality, thereby providing additional demand for predatory publishers. For example, Beall (2015b) identified a case using predatory publications to greatly inflate a researcher's Google Scholar citation count. Moreover, the increased expectations in the quality of publications in both tenure decisions and university resources incentivize the use of predatory publishers. This is particularly problematic for scholars in the developing world, where publishing in "international" journals often is a requirement for promotion.

Furthermore, the proliferation of predatory publishing creates broader confusion within disciplines. For example, Kaiser et al. (2013) pointed out the destructive influence in herpetology of the proliferation of taxons without proper evidence. Issues ranging from consistency in terminology to accepted methodological standards to the accumulation of knowledge become increasingly difficult to maintain because traditional peer-reviewed and predatory journals share the same academic marketplace.

Finally, by portraying themselves as peer-reviewed, predatory publishers risk damaging the integrity of academia, precisely at a time when social-science funding increasingly is in jeopardy. Research in predatory journals frequently is not heavily criticized by those outside of the field. For example, *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Berrett 2012) summarized an article published in *Psychology Research* (Gharib, Phillips, and Mathew 2012) that failed to identify the journal's questionable editorial standards. Attorneys also have decried how such questionable journals undermine the credibility of scholarly research submitted as court evidence (Hoenig 2014). Calin-Jageman and Beall (2013) argued that journalists should avoid citing predatory journals entirely. However, this puts the onus on those outside of the discipline to protect its standards and reputation. Whereas an academic audience within its insular community may call out potential junk science,[7] the discipline also must proactively tackle the ignorance among the larger audience of reputable-versus-questionable outlets.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

Reputable OA journals remain the lifeline for many scholars, especially in developing countries, and the proliferation of predatory publishers can lead to unwarranted discrimination against the reputable venues. The challenge thus becomes separating reputable from disreputable outlets.

A first step is to identify the common signs of predatory publishers: the lack of transparency on publishing fees, the subpar quality of the journal's web page, the unusual frequency of published articles, and the authors and editorial staff that are unknown in the field and concentrated in developing countries. This imperfect checklist should be supplemented with greater efforts at establishing publication-cost standards for reputable OA journals; the costs can vary from less than a hundred to several thousand dollars (Van Noorden 2013). Efforts to standardize or at least reduce the cost variance would help to identify predatory efforts.

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A next step is to focus attention on the alternatives to predatory outlets. Websites including JournalGuide[8] and the Journal/Author Name Estimation (JANE)[9] assist by suggesting reputable outlets based on a paper's title and abstract. Although the Beall List is a starting point for those outlets to avoid, a similarly expansive list of reputable journals relevant to political science's diverse subfields remains elusive. The frequent lists of journals provided by *PS* and the Australian Political Studies Association,[10] or inclusion in the Social Science Citation Index or Thomson Reuters Citation Report , provide useful shortcuts for authors. However, these sources are not exhaustive lists and frequently omit OA journals. Greater efforts are necessary to highlight OA

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journals that meet conventional peer-review expectations, such as those of the Directory of Open Access Journals.[11]

Admittedly, these steps are unlikely to curb the proliferation of predatory journals as demand from the naïve to the unscrupulous increases. Neither should the solution be to take the narrower standards often applied at top research universities and only count a select few prestigious outlets toward tenure and promotion. Instead, the discipline should focus more on promoting reputable OA journals and proactively engaging nonacademic audiences to limit the influence of predatory outlets. ■

NOTES

1. Gold OA refers to the publisher providing OA, whereas authors under Green OA provide access to published research outside of the publisher, such as an OA repository or the author's website.
2. Available at http://scholarlyoa.com/publishers.
3. Available at http://rhpsnet.com.
4. Available at http://aripd.org.
5. Beall also identified 52 online journals registered through ARIPD. Available at http://scholarlyoa.com/2014/01/09/questionable-oa-publisher-launches-with-a-clever-website-and-52-new-journals.
6. The only original part of the 7,720-word submission was the title "The Politics of Sexiness." For those unfamiliar with the song, see www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/justintimberlake/sexyback.html.
7. As recent cases of fraudulent work show (e.g., LaCour and Green 2014; Regnerus 2012), the peer-review process of reputable journals can fail to appropriately act as gatekeeper. Similarly, CNN retracted a story linking estrogen to vote choice based on (at the time) a forthcoming piece in *Psychological Science* (which is not a predatory publisher) after concerns about the study emerged (Byers 2012).
8. Available at www.journalguide.com.
9. Available at http://biosemantics.org/jane.
10. The list is available at www.auspsa.org.au/publications.
11. Available at http://doaj.org.

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