

## Editorial

## Predatory Publishing and the Psychology Behind it

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## Abstract

This Editorial article discusses the publishing strategies of some journals, the authors' reactions to them and the quality of publishing.

**Keywords:** predatory publishing, predatory journals

Psychological Thought, 2015, Vol. 8(1), 1–6, doi:10.5964/psyc.t.v8i1.136

Published (VoR): 2015-04-30.

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Ever since the 2001 Budapest Open Access Initiative it has become clear that making journal articles free and accessible to readers worldwide should be the future of academic publishing. The open access model might account for 50% of the scholarly journal articles sometime between 2017 and 2021, and 90% of articles as soon as 2020 (Lewis, 2012, as cited in Beall, 2012).

What makes the open access model attractive for authors and publishers? For authors, open access is a chance to become visible very early in their careers. As the scientific research impact is often an important criterion for academic promotion, being cited is critical for young authors. Of course, there are more motives for authors to choose open access journals: their names are heard of more often; their papers are more likely to become a source of discussion as they are freely available, and their self-esteem receives a boost. Also, we shouldn't ignore authors who believe that exposing their work is a challenge for other researchers and a method to validate their expertise.

For publishers, the open access model is also a chance to become visible very soon after publishing the first issue. At the Fifth Belgrade International Open Access Conference held in 2012 in Belgrade, Serbia, Mr. James Testa (Vice President, Editorial Development and Publisher Relations, Thomson Reuters) stated in the opening day that going open-access is a must for new journals on the market, in order to attract manuscripts and gain international visibility through citations. However, he also recognized that the majority of journals indexed in the Thompson Reuters Web of Science were *not* open access (Testa, 2012).

But perhaps the greatest challenge for open access publishers is the financial support. In the traditional publishing system, publishers are developing their budget mainly based on institutional and individual subscriptions for journals or articles (both for print or on-line editions). Of course, the budget is often supplemented with money coming from grants, sponsorships, donations, paid announcements and so on.

Moving to an open access policy means to give up on subscriptions, as all articles will be free for all readers worldwide, and search for a new financial strategy. According to [Beall \(2012\)](#), currently there are three such open-access models: (1) the golden model that is financially supported by a payment charged to the author(s) upon acceptance of a manuscript, with fees ranging from \$50 to several thousand dollars; (2) the green model, in which authors self-archive their works in open-access repositories; and (3) the platinum model, with no author fees, the publishing costs being supported by institutional funding and/or volunteer work. Although this kind of financial support seems risky, it actually lowers the costs, while changing academic publishing for the better and expanding worldwide access to the latest research ([Patel & Shukla, 2013](#)).

## The Rise of the Predatory Journals

Unfortunately, from an idealistic start at the beginning of the 3rd millennium, open access scientific journals gradually transformed into a global industry, driven by author publication fees instead of subscriptions ([Bohannon, 2013](#)). The authors' need to publish and being cited gave rise to a great number of new online publishers; nevertheless, this turned not to be entirely good news. Very soon after the flourishing of the open access movement, traditional publishers expressed a growing concern about the quality of these new publishers.

As [Beall \(2012\)](#) observed, many of these publishers are corrupt and exist only to make money from manuscript processing fees that are billed to author upon acceptance of their work. In other words, they exploit the golden open-access system just to gain money, while compromising the quality of the research work ([Patel & Shukla, 2013](#)).

These bogus publishers were identified as "predatory" by Jeffrey Beall, a librarian and researcher at the University of Colorado, Denver; he started researching these journals as he received numerous invitations to submit articles to previous unknown journals, but with attractive titles ([Patel & Shukla, 2013](#)). These predatory journals perform a minimum peer-review or skip it entirely, they focus on the increase of income, with many articles/number (or many issues/year) and they are attractive to inexperienced researchers thanks to being "internationally indexed". Lists of so-called predatory publishers or predatory journals were created based on specific criteria. For example, [Beall \(2015\)](#) identified no less than 744 open-access publishers with a portfolio that ranged from just a few to hundreds of individual journal titles.

These publishers are very good at appearing legitimate. They mimic famous journals' websites, they choose journal titles that are similar to serious ones, and list respected scientists on their editorial boards (often without their knowledge or permission) ([Beall, 2014](#)). In this regard, [Jalalian and Mahboobi \(2014\)](#) suggest caution when choosing to send manuscripts based on the name of the journal. For example, they identify some so-called "American Journals of..." that are very attractive for authors worldwide, but with no American authors publishing in them and with very low publishing standards.

These journals are designed to deceive, and they frequently prey on inexperienced authors, as the competition for author fees is fierce, mostly threatening these inexperienced ones ([Fernandez-Llimos, 2014](#)). Many of the

scholars worldwide receive several emails each day with the invitation to submit a manuscript to a certain journal; young graduates and even some experienced researchers are fooled into sending articles, after which they are notified in a couple of days about the acceptance of the paper and they are promptly charged with fees ranging from a few to several hundred dollars.

## A Threat to Science Itself

Predatory journals facilitate the occurrence of author misconduct. The customers of predatory journals are the authors, and not the readers, so in order to attract new manuscripts the publishers often ignore low-quality papers, plagiarism or self-plagiarism (Beall, 2012).

Predatory publishing threatens science itself, as the peer-review is also corrupt. For the publishers of predatory journals acceptance of manuscripts is a norm, and not an exception, as they publish the vast proportions of the papers they receive (Clark & Thompson, 2012). Also, the acceptance decision is announced very soon after the submission, often within 48 hours. As a result, weak articles get to be published (online or print versions).

What do representatives of such predatory journals say? One of them, who charges up to \$2,700 for each accepted paper, says there is no compromise on quality review policy, and that the comments are baseless and defamatory. Another publisher also included in Beall's list, says on its website that "There are no limits on the number or size of the papers we can publish" (as cited in Kolata, 2013).

We must not forget that science is the engine that moves modern civilization (Beall, 2014). Policy makers rely on data obtained through scientific research when they take decisions for the public interest. Health care providers need to update their clinical practice and synchronize with the latest findings in the field. Engineers need to use the latest technology in order to work faster and be more reliable. Psychologists have to implement the latest results within the field of psychotherapy or clinical research into their private practice. All these occupations rely on high-quality research, and predatory publishers pollute the body of research with findings that avoided an appropriate peer-review.

A recent experiment conducted by Bohannon (2013) revealed major flaws of the peer review system employed by these journals. Bohannon used fabricated authors and universities with African resemblance, and he submitted various versions of a fake scientific paper to over 300 open access journals worldwide. The article had potential ethical problems and major flaws regarding the research methods, but still it was accepted by 157 journals.

However, we should note that there always were pitfalls within the practice of peer-review, even of highly prestigious journals. For example, Bornmann (2012) claims the existence of no less than 25 sources of positive and negative biases that can potentially endanger the fairness of the peer review process. The Oppenheim effect is such a bias, and it describes the phenomenon that the author and not the manuscript itself is the criterion in determining the quality of the submission and the editorial decision. The effect is based on an incident where a reviewer realized that the manuscript he was evaluating was written by a friend (Charles Oppenheim). He called the editor and wanted to decline the review, but he was told that the paper belonged to Oppenheim and they both knew that it would be published anyway, so he should just go on with the review formalities (Bornmann, 2012).

Drugaş (2012) enumerates some other shortcomings of the peer-review system: it tends to encourage the conservative side of the academic community, and it promotes unethical conduct when the reviewer and the author are competitors. Finally, it often fails to identify plagiarism and fabricated evidence (Bornmann, Nast, & Daniel, 2008).

## Author Reactions and the Psychology Behind Predatory Publishing

There are many reasons why authors would choose to publish in such journals and thus we shall analyze so we get to the psychology behind this phenomenon. First of all, we can discuss some authors' option to avoid the peer-review process. Serious journals generally reject a great number of articles; for example, the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, indexed by PsycINFO, had a rejection rate of 81% in 2011 (Drugaş, 2012). Even if the article is accepted, the reviewers often require consistent revisions to be made as a condition to be published, which means more effort from the authors on the same submission. As a logical consequence, the time lapse between the moment of submission and the final acceptance decision could be as long as a year! Those who resort to predatory journals may gather in a very short period an impressive number of articles published in "indexed peer-reviewed" journals (Banerjee, 2013). Serious researchers who choose not to publish their work in bogus journals will be left behind in the rat race of academic promotions, unless policy makers or national committees will come up with qualitative rather than quantitative criteria.

So why bother, why work hard and why wait, when a simpler solution is available? Given the current system of research evaluation, where not only quality, but also quantity of publication counts, scholars are motivated to publish quick and easy (Haspelmath, 2013). If quantity and not quality is taken into consideration promotion, the appearance of an eager market for bogus publishers is understandable.

It is clear that the editors of the predatory journals are familiar with the fact that most authors need to publish one or two papers in journals indexed by Thomson Reuters or by other international databases (e.g. EBSCO, ProQuest, PubMed, Scopus etc.) that are acknowledged by national councils. After all, their offer to publish fast and in abundance is requested by the authors themselves, and thus the market for such journals flourishes.

Many of these authors feel angry when their papers are rejected by serious journals: "I have a long history of publishing, how dare you to reject my work or suggest significant changes to it?" Well-intentioned efforts of the authors to publish an article may turn into efforts to undermine or at least criticize the review process of serious journals if the manuscript was rejected. These researchers often forget that there is a difference between publishing in a serious journal or in a predatory one, and being listed in the table of contents of such journals may prove to be more harmful than expected.

So what is the future for academic publishing and how can authors protect themselves against predatory publishers? According to Beall (2012), scholars will need to develop a new skill, i.e. the "scholarly publishing literacy", which includes the ability to recognize and avoid publishing scams and identify counterfeit journals.

In this regard, Clark and Thompson (2012) suggest a short guide for developing a publication strategy. Authors should prioritize quality research, they should resist expedience and match messages, audiences and journals, and they should target only credible journals. Sometimes, this could mean ignoring call for papers, as appealing as these may sound. Although this may seem like an "academic deafness", making good choices about where to publish has never been as important as now. There is a great range of ways to disseminate research (e.g. social media or mass media), but the mainstream of academic research is still published in peer-reviewed journals.

Jalalian and Mahboobi (2014) state that disclosing the unethical practice of bogus publishers is the only existing action against them. For authors that really intend to avoid being manipulated for their work, Jalalian and Mahboobi recommend to ignore all unsolicited call-for papers emailed directly to the authors and mark them as spam. Journals that claim that are indexed by famous databases should be checked and all the provided links should be functional and match the claim. Other information about the journal should be analyzed: the archives, the peer-review procedure, and the recommendations for authors. If the publishing time is very short (less than two weeks), it is a red flag for the journal, as finding the appropriate reviewers and waiting for their opinion usually takes longer.

## Conclusions: Is There a Chance for Publishers of Open-Access Journals?

There are open-access journals that provide a fine quality control. There are genuine researchers who are working hard to develop an article and get it published in a peer reviewed journal. *Psychological Thought* hopes to host the efforts of such researchers, and the journal guarantees an honest selection of peer-reviewers, not only in terms of absence of conflict of interest, but also in the reviewer's area of expertise that matches the specific area of the manuscript. We strongly support authors' intention to publish, if their work can endure a double blind peer-review process and they are open to suggestions.

Switching from quantitative methods to qualitative approaches for assessing the research capacities of the authors could be a long-term strategy to protect academia from low-quality, predatory journals. A professional publisher, no matter how small it is, will care greatly about his field of expertise, it will seek to make available the honest work of the authors, and it will be respected for conducting a fair peer-review. Publication ethics will be clearly indicated. In time, the honest work of editors and of the board of reviewers will distinguish the quality journals from the predatory ones.

### Funding

The author has no funding to report.

### Competing Interests

Marius Druguş is a Section Editor for *Psychological Thought*.

### Acknowledgments

The author has no support to report.

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## About the Author

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