Editorial

Why we should worry less about predatory publishers and more about the quality of research and training at our academic institutions

In 2014 over 400,000 articles were published in about 8000 journals that many regard as predatory.\(^1\) The term “predatory publishers” was first used by Jeffrey Beall of the University of Colorado, who until recently documented this phenomenon on his blog and in an annual list.\(^2\) Although this term, and variants such as “predatory journals”, are widely used, they have been criticised.\(^3\) One problem is that the term predator may cover a spectrum of organisations, business activities and publications ranging from the amateurish but genuine to the deliberately misleading.

As with other ethical questions, drawing a line between good and bad can be difficult. In this respect, defining predatory behaviour poses similar difficulties to defining other types of unethical behaviour, such as plagiarism. Most people would agree that retying somebody else’s article and submitting it to another journal under a false name is quite different from inadequately paraphrasing a few words from another author’s properly cited work, yet it is hard to define exactly where plagiarism begins.\(^2\)

Jeffrey Beall lists over 50 characteristics he used to identify predatory publishers and journals from their websites but notes that although these features usually reflect poor practice, they are not unambiguous criteria.\(^4\) One of the most concerning features of predatory journals is that they claim to peer review submissions to ensure their quality, but actually they do not (and will, in fact, publish anything so long as the authors pay the article processing charge). This misleading characteristic was well demonstrated by investigative journalist John Bohannon who tested it by submitting clearly flawed manuscripts to over 300 journals, over half of which accepted them without proper scrutiny.\(^1\)

Whatever we choose to call them, it is therefore impossible to deny that many journals have worryingly low standards and some appear to deliberately mislead authors, for example by referencing bogus impact factors or hijacking the titles of legitimate journals.

Many of the companies on Beall’s list are based in Asia, especially India (although a predatory characteristic is that they claim to be based in the West). Some have argued that researchers from developing countries are most likely to be the victims of such publishers.\(^5\) Indeed, Xia et al noted that those who published in predatory journals were mainly “young and inexperienced researchers from developing countries”.\(^6\) Others have noted that non-native English speakers are more likely to be taken in by predatory websites.\(^7\)

Commentators have suggested several measures to deter predatory publishers. Organizations including the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA) have issued guidelines on good practice.\(^8\) Publishers have supported an educational campaign and website called “Think, check, submit”.\(^9\) But while editorials usually mention pressures on academics to publish, few have addressed how such pressure creates a market for the predatory publishers, or how this could be reduced or avoided. Another question that is often ignored is why so much poor quality research is being done and how institutions (and perhaps funders) should address this. Few would argue that the main problem of predatory journals is that the research findings and other articles they publish are of great importance and therefore deserve a more permanent and discoverable platform (although perhaps some of the articles do).

Rather than viewing predatory publishers as a disease in themselves, I suggest we should regard them instead as a symptom of malaise within the academic research establishment. Without unhelpful systems of research metrics that reward researchers for the quantity rather than the quality of their output, and which may be easily gamed, predatory journals would disappear as there would be no demand for them. Similarly, if universities and research institutions supported graduate students and faculty in improving research design and reporting, the low-quality output would dry up. As others have argued before, we need less but better research.\(^10\)

Likewise, while commentators bemoan the lack of peer review by predatory publishers, perhaps we should also criticise the absence of internal, collegial peer review which universities should provide before work is submitted to any journal. While peer review by journals can identify problems with research reporting and highlight omissions or ambiguities, it is too late to correct more fundamental weaknesses in research design. Surely it is the role of academic institutions to provide not just ethical review (via institutional review boards or research ethics committees) but also scientific review, to nurture strong methods and analytical techniques. If universities were doing a better job of training students and staff, poorly designed and executed research would not occur and research funds would be used more effectively.\(^11\)

So, while we need to alert researchers to the presence of predatory journals, especially those that hijack genuine journal titles...
and may deceive less experienced authors, I propose we should mostly put our efforts into transforming the academic research environment and reward systems, raising standards and developing true collegiality both within and between institutions. If we succeed in this, the market for predatory journals will disappear, and so will they.

Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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Elizabeth Wager, Publications Consultant

Sideview, Princes Risborough, UK

E-mail address: liz@sideview.demon.co.uk.

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