

# Predatory publishing

## What are the issues?

- Predatory publishing is generally defined as for-profit open access journal publication of scholarly articles without the benefit of peer review by experts in the field or the usual editorial oversight of the journals in question. The journals have no standards and no quality control and frequently publish within a very brief period of time while claiming that articles are peer-reviewed. Those who publish in these journals are frequently invited to serve on editorial boards or become editors with no reference to relevant experience to assume such roles
- Confusion between some legitimate open-access peer review journals and predatory open-access journals
- Predatory journals sometimes include legitimate scholars on their editorial masthead without the permission or knowledge of those individuals
- The Name Game – Predatory publishers frequently choose names that are very similar to the names of legitimate peer-reviewed journals
- Problem with the title ‘predatory publishing’ as treating authors, who knowingly publish in predatory journals, as innocent victims
- Who publishes in predatory journals? Many junior faculty and faculty from developing world and countries where English is a second language
- The related problem of predatory conferences and predatory proceeding publications
- Public loses faith in scholarly research and public government grants are questioned in terms of legitimacy of products of research
- Role of global university research rankings in adding to the pressure of publish or perish

## Recent discussion

### *On prevalence*

August 10, 2018, The Guardian stated that “more than 175,000 scientific articles have been provided by five of the largest ‘predatory open-access publishers’, including India-based Omics Publishing group and the Turkish World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology, or Waset”.

### *On the label predatory publishing*

July 10, 2018, The Economist, “...the ‘predatory’ label has proven broadly misleading. Authors typically know what’s up, or at least should when visiting journal websites rife with glaring errors of language and wild claims, such as rigorous peer reviews that can be completed in a jiffy.” [Further, there appears to be]... apparent collusions or at least the turning of a conveniently blind eye, appears most common in poorer countries.”

October 30, 2017, The New York Times, Gina Kolata notes “...its increasingly clear that many academics know exactly what they’re getting into, which explains why these journals have proliferated despite wide criticism.”

## Questions and possible solutions

- Whose problem is it?
- What do we have within our power that we can do?
- Is general advice at all useful, like [Think.Check.Submit?](#)

- Might preprints solve the problem anyway?
- How are publication ethics enforced globally? Is this even realistically possible?
- Approaches to address the problem of poor countries where scholars are trying to publish in English which is not their first language
- Help with publish or perish pressures, especially among junior scholars
- Mitigation of global rankings (or not)  
Other?

This was discussed at the start of the COPE Forum on Monday 5 November 2018.

**COMMENTS FROM THE FORUM (Monday 5 November 2018) – NOTE, Comments do not imply formal COPE advice, or consensus.**

- This is a hot topic and appears to be epidemic in nature. Many people are concerned about the issue. With the pressure to publish, and people who are prepared to publish without providing the opportunity to peer review or provide expertise to improve their product, there is a real problem here.
- Junior scholars seem to find it very difficult to decide which are legitimate journals/publishers.
- The problem seems to be particularly relevant for authors who have a difficult time publishing in English language journals because English is not their first language. A lot of the main issues raised are around junior faculty members, less developed countries and non-English speaking authors who are being innocently drawn in.
- However, there are others who are not being innocently drawn in, but in fact are colluding to get a publication very easily that they can then put on their CV.
- There are also cases of more senior people being duped, with researchers having worked published in dubious journals. It is a very wide issue with many different elements. The problem is beyond simple education—there are few novel solutions at the moment. Part of problem is that some invitations are very sophisticated, and people can be duped.
- The problem is international, involving transnational communities, so there are no easy solutions (eg, it is very difficult to sue or penalise people across countries/legislations).
- Is the term “predatory” a useful description? There has been a trend towards the use of “illegitimate entities” or “questionable publishing”. However, whether or not we accept the term predatory, it is in common use and perhaps we should adopt the term and do something more useful with it.
- In addition to predatory journals and publishers, there are also predatory conferences. The proceedings are not peer reviewed.
- Should we advise authors and academics to Google themselves and see if they are appearing in dubious editorial boards without their knowing? Self-policing could be encouraged.
- Newer ways and new techniques seem to be constantly emerging, and predatory journals and publishers are becoming more sophisticated and operating in the way that legitimate journals operate. With more sophisticated and advanced methods, it is going to be even more difficult to detect bogus invites to journals.

- COPE is broadening its membership base with the pilot institutions and other membership categories being considered, so that a dialogue can be created between different stakeholders. There are tenure and promotion pressures on academics which depend on the number of their publications. Universities are variably able to screen what are predatory versus what are excellent journals. Due to the complexities of the issue, we need to come together as a consortium and think about our mutual problems and decide how to address the problem both in terms of predatory articles and how universities and address the issue of tenure and promotion.
- Think.Check.Submit was set up to educate people who might be tempted by a scam. COPE collaborates with this initiative. It is a valuable tool based on a simple checklist, and on the principles of transparency, for what is a good scholarly journal. It would be good if it were publicised more and was better known, especially in areas where there are a lot of submissions, and in places where people find it hard to publish in English language journals. It helps a lot of researchers.
- It would be very helpful if we used technology through machine learning or artificial intelligence to automate Think.Check.Submit. In the medical field, in the USA, you could use the NLM as a base, and then if the journal is not on the list, think. Unlike the static list, it could be continually updated with feedback from authors, editors, academicians and publishers. Instead of publishing a list of 'bad journals' instead maintain a list of credible journals. Use crowdsourcing with an audit function to build it.
- Think.Check.Attend is a similar initiative for conferences.
- Judgements about predatory journals and publishers are not necessarily binary. Assessing bad practice is not simple or straightforward. Deceptive practice is a major problem, not simply publishing poor papers, but those who are actively deceiving people in that practice. Can we educate board members, and vet board members to see if they are on the boards of lots of disreputable journals? Can we tackle authors citing disreputable journals?
- With the departure a year ago of Jeffery Beall's list, would another similar list be useful for researcher authors and academics? It is very valuable to have that kind of resource and Cabell's have taken on that role and their whitelist/blacklist is available. However, COPE would not consider taking on that role as part of its mission.
- Beall's list was unreliable as it was never peer reviewed or externally validated. DOAJ as a whitelist is preferable.
- What can an editor do if he is listed on a journal without his knowledge? There is no guidance available on what to do in this situation and who can help.
- What can COPE do to help authors retract their names or articles in predatory journals once they fall prey and do not hear from the editor despite repeated requests? Can victims be allowed to submit their work again to legitimate journals?
- What do we know on the use of predatory journals to spread fake news (antivaccers, climate denials, etc)? <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2017/07/25/cabells-new-predatory-journal-blacklist-review/>
- In the context of predatory journals, would COPE consider retracting papers to punish journals?
- There has been discussion about raising journal standards (improving transparency and following ethical processes) to separate legitimate journals from illegitimate journals. Is

this a feasible way forward? How should we deal with legitimate journals who are trying to be transparent and follow good publishing practices but are just not quite there yet?

- The additional problem with predatory journals is that there is a possibility that the site will eventually go down, losing all of the papers that have been published. A lot of those papers will be worthwhile, despite the journal's nature.

**ACTIONS:** COPE is addressing this issue in a number of ways. We will review the comments from the Forum as the basis for a discussion document. The discussion document will be published early next year, and COPE will circulate the document for input/feedback. COPE is also involved in a plenary seminar on predatory publishing at the World Congress on Research Integrity (WCRI) next June (2019) in Hong Kong.

### **COMMENTS POSTED ON THE WEBSITE**

*Posted by R BARIK, 19/10/2018*

I am invited for reviewing manuscripts for various journals in the field of cardiovascular science especially clinical and intervention cardiology. I have few publications as first author. I am also editorial board member of a few journals. What I found on the journey is as follows:

1. Frequently I found the co-authors are not aware that there is submission including them.
2. Many submissions do not have standard checklists attached [consent form, ethical approval, copyright form really signed by all the authors and plagiarism statement].
3. Many a times, a single paper is published in several journals just modifying the content or title.
4. For most submissions where publication fully depends upon payment of the author(s), the quality of paper is bad/duplicate/does not add anything to existing literature.
5. I come from a developing country where, to some extent, the research is supported by grants but there is no financial support for publication as an open access article in high impact journal.
6. Is it always necessary that the author must take ethical committee approval for publishing an article irrespective of type of article?

*Posted by Emilie Wang, 25/10/2018*

Hi,

Thanks for this opportunity. I would like to ask 2 questions.

1. Is there a website to list out all the predatory journals/publishers?
2. Will COPE work with individual countries, especially developing countries with English as a second language, to prevent publishing at these predatory journals?

*Posted by Amitabh Prakash, 30/10/2018*

While the established publishing houses have 'standard operating procedures' for launching new titles, I suspect that genuine new publishers do not have easy access to guidance on the ethical steps to launch a new journal. Perhaps COPE might consider preparing such a guide/check-list, i.e., what should be kept in mind when thinking of launching a new title, when and where to register the new title, how to recruit an Editor in Chief and establish a genuine Editorial Board, what systems are available for online manuscript management, standard peer review methods and time lines, various open access and subscription models, when and where to apply for indexing, essential information that should be freely available on the journal home page, etc.

*Posted by Jessica Polka, 31/10/2018*

In response to the question, "What do we have within our power that we can do?":

If all journals published the content of their peer reviews (anonymously or not), authors and other stakeholders could directly assess the quality of the review process at any journal. Journal editors and publishers can make their own process more transparent while calling for others to do the same. Specifically, over 300 journals have now signed a letter committing to (or affirming that they already do) offer the option to publish peer review reports ([asapbio.org/letter](https://asapbio.org/letter)), and additional signatories are always welcome.

*Posted by Mark Hager, 31/10/2018*

I dedicated my summer 2017 editorial to this topic. My advice to authors was to be aware of questionable outlets and resist the pull to submit to them. I also describe (in the editorial) my own 'secret shopping' with a predatory journal so that I could report on the communication and timeline. If you're interested in seeing the editorial, it's at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/m9ezbl42oc60ls5/Hager-NML-Editorial-27-4.pdf?dl=0>

*Posted by Mohamad Mostafa, 4/11/2018*

Very important and hot topic. I would also like to draw attention to the predatory conferences/meetings problem. These questionable conferences are only seeking the registration fees and are offering presentation opportunities for the researchers.

These conferences usually mention fake indexing claims about the conference proceedings just to attract as much researchers as possible.

*Posted by Trevor Lane, 5/11/2018*

For journals to check their editorial office procedures against the 10 COPE Core Practices, COPE has guidance in the form of this infographic: [https://publicationethics.org/files/General\\_Approach\\_To\\_Publication\\_Ethi...](https://publicationethics.org/files/General_Approach_To_Publication_Ethi...)

Unethical journals lie on a spectrum, with legitimate but poorly managed or low-quality journals (which may or may not charge authors for open-access publishing) on one end, and scam/predatory journals that cheat authors on the other. The latter often use mimicry (similar name and website design to those of a reputable journal, or impressive-sounding editorial board, indexes, metrics) and may use an active-search strategy to target people with spam, or a sit-and-wait ambush strategy as authors come across their website in a search-engine search.

For some authors, there is symbiosis or mutualism rather than a predator-prey relationship, because those authors knowingly use a journal's service as a vanity press/publisher. There are also sham journals, which may not be predatory per se and are transparent about fees but operate as a vanity publisher.

Although there are safelist and watchlist approaches, ultimately, it's a case of caveat emptor (buyer beware). Think Check Submit has the basics at <https://thinkchecksubmit.org/> and mentions checking journal membership of COPE, DOAJ, and OASPA. Those groups use the 16

Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing as part of their entry criteria. <https://publicationethics.org/resources/guidelines-new/principles-transp...> can be used to check journal websites and sample articles.

Apart from authors, there are others who need to take heed; perhaps Think Check Submit can also be Think Check Read/Cite, Think Check Hire/Promote/Award.

There is also Think.Check.Attend (for conferences) at <https://thinkcheckattend.org/> .  
Trevor Lane (COPE Council Member)

*Posted by Phaedra Cress, 7/11/2018*

Predatory Conferences were mentioned on this webinar and in the above comments. For anyone interested in learning more, I wrote about this last year and the article is free and open for all here: <https://academic.oup.com/asj/article/37/6/734/2966192>