

HOW TO RECOGNIZE AND AVOID POTENTIAL, POSSIBLE, OR PROBABLE PREDATORY OPEN-ACCESS PUBLISHERS, STANDALONE, AND HIJACKED JOURNALS

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Abstract

Introduction and aim: The Internet has enabled an easy method to search through the vast majority of publications and has improved the impact of scholarly journals. However, it can also pose threats to the quality of published articles. New publishers and journals have emerged so-called open-access potential, possible, or probable predatory publishers and journals, and so-called hijacked journals. It was our aim to increase the awareness and warn scholars, especially young researchers, how to recognize these journals and how to avoid submission of their papers to these journals.

Methods: Review and critical analysis of the relevant published literature, Internet sources and personal experience, thoughts, and observations of the authors.

Results: The web blog of Jeffrey Beall, University of Colorado, was greatly consulted. Jeffrey Beall is a Denver academic librarian who regularly maintains two lists: the first one, of potential, possible, or probable predatory publishers and the second one, of potential, possible, or probable predatory standalone journals. Aspects related to this topic presented by other authors have been discussed as well.

Conclusion: Academics should bear in mind how to differentiate between trustworthy and reliable journals and predatory ones, considering: publication ethics, peer-review process, international academic standards, indexing and abstracting, preservation in digital repositories, metrics, sustainability, etc.

Keywords: predatory publishers, standalone journals, hijacked journals, open access

Introduction

Over the past several years there has been a debate in academic circles on the issue of how to recognize potential, possible, or probable open-access predatory scholarly publishers and how to avoid publishing in so-called hijacked journals.

Researchers, scholars, doctors and academic staff need to publish the results of their work and make them accessible to their collea-

gues and to the public. Also, academics tend to publish as many papers as possible in order to be promoted within their academic institutions. At this point, they have to cope with the issue of how to choose a relevant, reliable, true, peer-review journal, indexed in a reputable scientific database and then submit their manuscripts for publication. Since the emergence of these potential, possible, or probable open-access predatory publishers and journals this task has be-

come even more daunting for scholars. Online hackers and cybercriminals have built fake or counterfeit websites for journals that actually mimic reputable journals.

Background: In 2008 Jeffrey Beall, an academic librarian and researcher at the University of Colorado, Denver, U.S.A. had received a large number of e-messages inviting him to submit articles to journals he was not familiar with. He then started extensive research on open-access publishers and coined the term “predatory scholarly open-access publishers”. Such publishers use a business model where authors have to pay in order to publish their articles. In the *Chronicle of Higher Education* from 2012 Beall gives his definition of *predatory open-access publishing*: “*Predatory open-access publishers are those that unprofessionally exploit the gold open-access model for their own profit. That is to say, they operate as scholarly vanity presses and publish articles in exchange for the author fee. They are characterized by a various level of deception and lack of transparency in their operations. The open-access publishing model seems like a recipe for abuse: The more articles a publisher publishes, the more money it makes.*” [1].

The aim of this paper is to give authors guidelines on how to recognize hijacked journals and to avoid cooperation with potential, possible, or probable predatory open-access publishers; that is, to raise awareness of dishonest publishing practices.

Methods

To accomplish the set aim, we have used information from the relevant published literature and registered websites available to the public, as well as our personal experience, thoughts, and observations.

First of all, we have consulted the blog platform and website of Jeffrey Beall (see: <https://scholarlyoa.com>) [2].

We have also consulted the list compiled and updated by Dr. Mehrdad Jalalian, a physician, journalist, book publisher and publication ethics researcher, who considers himself the world’s leading researcher on the topics of hijacked journals (See: <http://www.mehrdadjalalian.com/index.php/updates-of-hijacked-journals>) [3].

To further illustrate the topic, we present the characteristics of predatory publishers and hijacked journals (Box 1).

Box 1. Characteristics of Predatory Publishers and Hijacked Journals

<p>Large fees for articles revealed only after papers are submitted Aggressively campaigning for academics to submit articles or serve on editorial boards Listing academics as members of editorial boards without their permission Appointing fake academics to editorial boards Mimicking the name or web site style of more established journals Improper use of ISSNs Fake or non-existent impact factors Accepting articles quickly with little or no peer review or quality control Journals are not listed in standard periodical directories (such as Ulrich’s Periodicals Directory)</p>
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Results

Potential, possible, or probable predatory publishers

Predatory publishers use spam email to invite authors to publish their manuscripts, usually indicating large fees after papers are submitted. In fact, predatory publishing uses the open-access publishing business model, where it is very easy to set up an open-access publishing website. These websites can be created by almost anyone who has some knowledge of how to design them [4, 5]. They charge publication fees to authors without providing the editorial and publishing services associated

with legitimate journals. Sometimes they even negotiate a lower fee, when a potential author would comment on excessive fees. They indulge in very unethical and unscholarly practices just to collect money for publication. These publishers do not respect any of the policies and guidelines given by the Council of Science Editors [6], International Association of Scientific, Technical & Medical Publishers (STM) Code of Conduct [7], or Committee on Publication Editors (COPE) [8]. Instead, to promote, preserve and make the published material available, these publishers exploit the author-pays model for their own profit. They also call

academics to serve on the editorial boards in order to present an impression that it is a respectable journal. They have little or no peer review in most cases. Some claim to assess submission within 72 hours and digitally publish them upon acceptance and receipt of the fee. “*If the peer-review process were only that simple!*” – says Robert Bartholomew in his paper [9, 10]. Many of them have no digital preservation and they can disappear at any time, which will result in the loss of content.

Declan Butler, in his excellent paper on the explosion of open-access publishing [11], offers a checklist to identify reputable publishers. He warns authors to perform due diligence before they submit their manuscripts to a journal. He advises authors to: check whether the publisher has verifiable contact information, check whether editorial board list includes recognized experts with full affiliations, check whether the journal prominently displays its policy for author fees, be cautious when receiving e-mail invitations to submit to journals or to become an editorial board member, etc.

Beall has created *Beall’s List of potential, possible, or predatory scholarly open-access publishers* (See:

<https://scholarlyoa.com/publishers/>) [12] and he updates it regularly. He published his first list of predatory publishers in 2010 and in 2012 he posted his criteria for determining and evaluating publishers (See: https://scholarlyoa.com/2012/11/30/criteria-for-determining-predatory-open-access-publishers-2nd-edition) [13].

Here is one example of a medical publisher with some problems, which has been recently presented by Beall on his site [14]. It is InnoVison Health Media, which is a Minnesota-based publisher of six online medical journals. Beall has investigated this publisher and discovered that there were many editorial problems, including late issues, poor editing practices, etc. as well as questionable editorial boards. Therefore, Beall recommends that researchers consider publishing their papers in higher-quality journals than in InnoVision’s offerings.

Potential, possible, or probable predatory open-access publishers have no transparency in publishing operations, provide insufficient information or hide information about author

fees, falsely claim to have their content indexed in legitimate abstracting and indexing services, operate based in a Western country chiefly for the purpose of functioning as a vanity press for scholars in a developing country, copy “authors guidelines” from other publishers, do not use ISSN numbers, DOI numbers or use them improperly, and so forth.

Potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access journals (standalone journals)

These standalone journals do not have an official publisher behind their work. They act essentially alone, that is to say, on behalf of one or several individuals. Those who publish in predatory journals are, for the most part, young and inexperienced researchers from developing countries [15]. We believe that economic and sociocultural conditions in these developing countries have contributed to the differences found in authorship between predatory and non-predatory journals [16]. These new journals are actually competing for authors and their money and offer little in return [17].

Jeffrey Beall has also created a list of questionable, scholarly open-access standalone journals (See:

<https://scholarlyoa.com/individual-journals/>) [18].

For example, one of the journals on his list is American Journal of Advances in Medical Science (ARNACA) [19]. If you visit this website, you will discover that the chief editor, associate editor, and managing editor are from India, and all the members of the Editorial Board are from Asian countries. Furthermore, all the reviewers are from India, yet the journal title is “*American Journal of Advances in Medical Science*”.

Hijacked journals

Hijacked journals are those that try to defraud academics and researchers by using the name and reputation of the original journals. They usually send e-mails to attract their victims who are from certain countries (usually low and middle-income countries).

The journal falsely claims to have an impact factor and to be included in reputable databases. It lacks peer-review, or the corresponding author is asked to suggest reviewers,

who are subsequently used later by the publisher. Hijacked journals are usually not listed in standard periodical directories or are not cataloged in library databases.

The number of hijacked journals has rapidly increased over the past several years. People included in this process have managed to cheat professors and Ph.D. scholars who are in urgent need of publishing their articles in journals that are found on the Web of Science Journal Citation Reports. Hijackers create a journal website and attract authors by indicating an impact factor of the journal, which means that it is a Thomson Reuters indexed journal, and by conducting the peer review process in just a couple of weeks.

Also, many require considerable manuscript processing charges for authors. Such journals are considered to be primarily interes-

ted in making quick money and paying little or no attention to peer review [16].

A study by Jalalian and Mahboobi has shown that many of the fake journals have started to imitate the features of respectable scientific journals, and not only some relatively young journals but also such with a long tradition [20]. They even mimic the name of the journals. Among these journals are Wulfenia Journal, Jokull Journal, or Sylwan.

Authors can be easily deceived when they receive an invitation to submit their manuscript to journals whose title or logo closely resembles a highly respected publication [17].

Here is one example: The real Wulfenia journal may be found on the following website http://www.landesmuseum.ktn.gv.at/210226w_DE.htm?seite=15 [21] where there is a warning on the other website where the hijacked Wulfenia Journal is found (Box 2).

Box 2. Warning at the genuine Wulfenia journal regarding websites of the hijacked Wulfenia Journal [21]

The real Wulfenia journal website:

http://www.landesmuseum.ktn.gv.at/210226w_DE.htm?seite=15

Warning about the other website where the hijacked Wulfenia Journal is found:

Warning!

The websites

www.wulfeniajournal.at

www.wulfeniajournal.com

www.multidisciplinarywulfenia.org

are not the official websites of the journal "Wulfenia: Mitteilungen des KärntnerBotanikzentrums" published by the Regional Museum of Carinthia. These websites criminally usurp the identity of the official journal. They fraudulently use false information, a false editorial board, and false publication requirements to encourage authors to submit articles and to transfer page fees to a bank account in Yerevan (Armenia).

The list of hijacked journals created by Jeffrey Beall can be seen at:

<https://scholarlyoa.com/other-pages/hijacked-journals/> [22]. He updates it regularly.

There is also another list created by Dr. Mehrdad Jalalian, journalist, and researcher, who is particularly concerned with the issue of hijacked journals [23]. His hijacked journal list can be found and consulted from the following website: <http://www.mehrdadjalalian.com/index.php/list-of-hijacked-journals-and-fake-publishers/30-hijacked-journal-list-2014-first-edition-june-2014> [24].

We have to emphasize the fact that this issue of hijacked journals is a great threat for medical sciences, that is, for clinical practice and health policy making. Many of the articles published in these journals will appear in the

search results when retrieving literature and will be a source of new medical hypotheses that can be used to attack the reliability and validity of future clinical research [25–27].

Mehdi Dadkhah and Giorgio Bianciardi [28] in their paper discuss the possible ranking of predatory journals. First, they present criteria for detection of predatory journals, which include: editorial members' credentials, review process, and publishing, announcements, Open Access policies and publication charges. Further in their paper they present their predatory ranking metric entitled "predatory rate", based on the noted criteria.

Discussion

Open-access is a noble concept by which research is freely accessible to scholars and the

public. It has brought substantial changes to higher education. Many open-access journals are legitimate and contribute to scientific knowledge, but recently a significant number of untrustworthy journals has appeared [9, 29].

New terms have been coined: predatory publishers and predatory journals referring to fraudulent publication practices. In the literature much has been lately written on predatory journals, but not on hijacked journals [5, 16, 30–33]. The intention of those who have dealt with the issue has been to raise awareness among scholars how to recognize and avoid submission of manuscripts to potential, possible, or probable predatory journals and hijacked journals.

This study has purposely been presented in biomedical journals published in Macedonia since we belong to this academic community. It is an imperative of the editorial board of the journals to inform scholars about this new threat on the publishing scene. Academics involved in faculty and staff promotion processes should warn and advise young scholars where to submit their papers for publication and the tenure and promotion review committees should be prepared to conduct a serious assessment of articles published in standalone or hijacked journals. Unethical scientists earn tenure and promotion at the expense of the honest [34]. The higher education sector has to employ academic rigor so as to maintain quality and integrity within publishing practice. Academics have to be more skilled in their own digital skills that will help them to identify fraud on the Internet and “low credibility”, counterfeit, and predatory journals [35, 36].

Scientists must be able to recognize publishing fraud. Although there is no real clue to the problem, suggestions have been offered how to combat predatory publishers and journals. There is an ongoing debate over the use of black- and white-lists of journals, as well as over the use of metrics, being identified as a problematic factor and needs further elaboration in some other study [29].

“A black-list is easier to compile and maintain than a white list and by its nature contains more updated information than a white-list could. I often hear criticisms of my lists. Some believe that the predatory publishing problem is really a small problem, and

my highlighting the problem is making it appear bigger than it really is. Others claim that we really need to give these predatory publishers a larger opportunity to succeed, that it is not fair to attack people from poor countries....” – said Jeffrey Beall in *Learned Publishing* [4, 11, 37].

Open-access associations such as Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA) and Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) should have a set of criteria to which publishers and journals must comply with in order to be considered trustworthy. In fact, OASPA was founded in 2008 after facing the challenges of OA journals. DOAJ is continually working to strengthen the journal approval process and it has already tightened up its inclusion criteria, with the purpose of serving as a white-list, as opposed to Beall’s black-list. Also, regarding medical publishers and journals, the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) has collaborated with the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), DOAJ and OASPA and has developed *Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing*. Editors of peer-reviewed medical journals should adhere to these principles [38, 39].

Beall said that he engaged himself in this topic partly by his sense of duty, as an academic librarian, to evaluate online resources and to help patrons to “recognize scholarly publishing scams and avoid them”, and partly by the “private and very positive feedback” he receives from researchers and librarians [11]. Thus, academics may consult Beall’s weblog and check the credibility of the listed journals. They cannot solely rely on his list, but should make their own evaluations as well.

Some criticize Beall’s work or wonder whether it is fair to classify these publishers as “predatory” [40–42] stating that Beall is acting as prosecutor, judge and jury on who is predatory and who is not. Some say that it is an open question whether it is fair to classify these publishers and journals as “predatory” [43]. However, many state that Beall’s list is widely read and consulted by librarians and researchers, and they applaud his efforts to reveal shady publishing practices. Some publishers, for example, the Academic Research Publishing Agency publish journals that cover very

broad subject areas. It is difficult to image how a single journal of this publisher, *International Journal of Research and Reviews in Applied Sciences* [44] can validate papers from such a wide range of scientific fields (computer science, mathematics, economics, applied physics, nuclear engineering, chemistry, and many more) [43].

We are absolutely confident that scholars should avoid publishing their papers in hijacked journals; academics should refuse membership on Editorial Boards of such journals and they should not accept reviewing any papers submitted for publication in hijacked journals. The question on whether to accept the already published papers in these hijacked journals during the tenure and promotion processes is still under debate, since not all authors are informed about the existence and identification of these journals. Some authors suggest that already-published papers in the hijacked journals deserve a second chance, that is, these papers can be published in other legitimate journals and cannot be considered as plagiarized papers [31].

The situation is slightly different with the potential, possible, or probable open-access publishers and/or journals. These categories contain different sub-groups that are very roughly categorized in the Beall's list [41]. There is a real possibility that publishers and journals from poor, underdeveloped and developing countries be unfairly compared with those from developed countries. It means that high criteria from highly developed countries are also applied for developing countries creating comparison bias [45, 46]. Therefore, recommendations given for hijacked journals cannot be entirely applied to predatory publishers and/or journals. It is crucial to raise awareness among scholars for their existence and to increase efforts for their recognition and identification as well as to advise the editorial board to improve their quality and to follow the principles of international publishing standards.

In our opinion, everyone should check the following items or look for answers to some questions prior to making his/her decision where to submit the manuscript for publication (Box 3).

Box 3. Items to be checked or questions to be answered prior to making decision where to submit the manuscript for publication
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the exact title of the journal names of the editors its place of publication and journal's business address contact information publication fees sustainability indexing databases ISSN number statement of publishing ethics, COPE membership impact factor in the Thomson Reuters list the quality of the already published papers, evidence of peer review preservation that is depositing the digital content with a trusted, financially secure library (for example many publishers deposit their digital contents in the British Library) have leading scholars in the field you are interested in, have already published articles in those journals consult black- and white-lists of journals think critically and don't do anything to compromise your career resist the temptation to publish quickly share information about fraudulent practices on scholarly social networks

Further studies are necessary in order to cover other aspects of potential, possible, or probable predatory publishers and journals, including the used metrics and financial issues.

Recently, at the meeting of the Annual Assembly of the Macedonian Association of Medical Editors (MAME), held on 13 April 2016,

special attention was given to "Critical analysis of publishing in journals with Open Access", emphasizing the journals which should not be considered for submitting papers to them. At the MAME website (See: www.mame.mk) [47] separate links are available to approach "Potential, possible, or probable predatory open access

publishers", "Potential, possible, or probable predatory open access journals", "Hijacked journals" and "Wrong metrics for journals". Predatory publishers and journals were recognized as the most serious problem and threat. It was proposed to inform the Faculty of Medicine and the Ss Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje and other universities in R. Macedonia to adjust the procedure and criteria for election in academic educational and scientific titles so as not to recognize the papers published in journals by publishers whose names can be found in Beall's list [12]. The warning was also directed to hijacked journals that are kidnapped by another publisher to earn huge sums illegally.

Since the issue on predatory publishers and hijacked journals is certainly targeting medical scholars, we decided to publish this paper in a number of Macedonian biomedical journals in order to warn not only young scholars, but also all medical professionals and academic institutions on the threat of being falsely attracted to publish their manuscripts in illegitimate journals.

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Резиме

КАКО ДА СЕ ПРЕПОЗНААТ И ДА СЕ ИЗБЕГНАТ ПОТЕНЦИЈАЛНИ, МОЖНИ ИЛИ ВЕРОЈАТНИ ИЗДАВАЧИ, СПИСАНИЈА-ГРАБЛИВЦИ СО ОТВОРЕН ПРИСТАП И КИДНАПИРАНИ СПИСАНИЈА

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Вовед и цел: Интернетот овозможи лесен метод за пребарување огромен број публикации и го зголеми влијанието на научните списанија. Меѓутоа, тој, исто така, претставува и закана за квалитетот на објавените трудови. Се појавија нови издавачи и списанија, т.н. потенцијални, можни или веројатни издавачи и списанија-грабливци со отворен пристап и т.н. киднапирани

списанија. Целта на трудот беше да се подигне свеста и да се предупредат научниците, а особено младите истражувачи, како да ги препознаат овие списанија и како да избегнуваат да ги поднесуваат своите трудови во вакви списанија.

Методи: Преглед и критичка анализа на релевантна објавена литература, интернет-извори на информации и лично искуство, размислувања и погледи на авторите на трудот.

Резултати: Најмногу го користевме блогот на Џефри Бел од Универзитетот во Колорадо. Тој е библиотекар во Денверската академска библиотека и на својот блог редовно ги дополнува двете листи: првата за потенцијални, можни или веројатни издавачи-грабливци и, втората, за потенцијални, можни или веројатни грабливи и киднапирани списанија со отворен пристап. Во трудот се претставени и ставовите на други автори во врска со оваа проблематика.

Заклучок: Научниците треба да прават разлика меѓу списанија кои се веќе афирмирани и кредибилни и списанија-грабливци, притоа имајќи ги на ум следниве работи: етика во публикувањето, процес на рецензирање на трудовите, интернационални академски стандарди, индексирање и вклучување во бази на податоци, зачувување во дигитални репозиториуми, метрика, одржливост итн.

Клучни зборови: издавачи-грабливци, списанија-грабливци, киднапирани списанија, отворен пристап