

# Publish and Perish? How to Spot a Predatory Publisher

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## Introduction

Welcome to this webinar on predatory or problem publishers. These publishers are part of a growing phenomenon in digital publication and one which researchers need to learn about to safeguard both themselves and their careers.

## Topics

In this session we are going to cover the following topics. We'll start by looking at what a predatory publisher is (and why the word predatory appears in inverted commas); why they're a problem for researchers as well as why some people consider them a legitimate business model; some warning signs to watch for and a checklist that you can follow either as a librarian advising researchers or as someone looking to publish yourself.

## What is a predatory publisher?

It's obviously a good idea to start with a definition so we're all on the same page moving through the rest of the webinar. Before we start I just want to acknowledge that there are some problems with using the term predatory as it has certain connotations that might not be completely appropriate. We'll cover this in more depth later in the session but I want to explain that I use it here as this is what these publishers are commonly known as so it's likely to be the term that your researchers use when asking questions. You might want to substitute the term problem publishers with your research community.

## Definitions

There is no one concrete definition on what exactly a predatory publisher is but they all follow similar patterns.

On the screen there are three attempts at a definition:

- The first is from a librarian names Jeffrey Beall who popularised the term predatory publishing. Beall was a scholarly communications librarian from Colorado who was aware of this problem and who maintained a list of publishers he considered as problematic. As you can see from his definition on the screen he considered them to be publishers who exploited the lack of understanding about the gold model of Open Access where authors can pay to make their work open. It's important to note at this point that Beall's List as

it became known, wasn't without controversy. It was subject to several legal cases from publishers on the list who didn't like being called predatory and Beall ended up having to remove his list to avoid more problems. There is also another problem with any one person or institution maintaining a black list – it is in itself open to bias. Beall's list was (and still is if you know where to look) very popular and it can be a problem when this represents the opinions and judgements of just one person.

- The second definition comes from Peaches Udoma through the website for Open Access week and given the connection of predatory publishing to Open Access I thought this was an important one to include.
- The final definition comes from Wikipedia and provides a good all-round definition. It's also likely to be the one that most researchers will come across as it comes up first on Google! This one expands slightly on the previous definitions and talks about the main business model for these publishers – essentially those who charge a fee without providing any of the services usually associated with this fee.

One thing all of these definitions have in common is the word 'exploit' and this is the main perception of predatory publishers – they are firms who are there to exploit researchers, exploit their misunderstandings and trick them into publishing their work. As we go through this session it's important to keep in mind that this is only one perception and we'll discuss the opposing view later.

### **What is a 'predatory' publisher?**

- Although these definitions all follow a similar theme they are all subtly different. One of the main problems with these publishers is that there is not one concrete definition which we can point people towards as what is predatory to one person can seem like an acceptable business model to another. However, there are a few things that you can watch out for.
- Typically these publishers will reach out to authors to solicit content via email. This usually starts just after a researcher has had something published for the first time as this is when their name will start appearing in library catalogues, repositories and other publication databases. Predatory publishers will trawl these databases looking for names and email out a generic invitation to publish or sit on an editorial board out of the blue.
- As demonstrated by the Wikipedia definition these publishers will charge authors for publication services like copyediting which they then won't provide. This is often called an Open Access or publication fee which can be confusing for researchers who have grasped that they may need to pay for publication now but are unsure about exactly how that works. The problem with this is that predatory publishers accept content 'as is' without doing any further

checks on it. In some cases this means that typos and other small errors slip through but in others it's a much bigger problem. This work is being published and promoted as peer reviewed academic research when it isn't. It could contain serious factual or other errors which could have been spotted at the review stage which has implications for research integrity. It's also misleading researchers who think they have paid money towards some of these services when in reality it's just being pocketed by the publisher.

- Essentially these titles are a form of vanity press but the crucial difference is that they don't promote themselves as such. They claim to offer peer reviewed academic research when in fact most of them just take payment to reproduce content as it's received.

Researchers who need to 'publish or perish' are often very flattered that they have been asked to publish but there are some hidden dangers to be aware of.

### **Why are they a problem?**

Let's take a step back for a moment and think about the negative aspects of predatory publishers – why are they always framed as such a problem?

### **Open Access recap**

As we've mentioned, these journals have historically exploited a lack of understanding about what open access publishing is. When it was first introduced Open Access was (and for some still is) very confusing to researchers. They were being told that they needed to potentially pay a fee when sharing their work in order to do so in a way which made it compliant with both funder mandates and assessment exercises such as the REF. Even though people knew that they had to pay money they weren't always sure what they were paying money for and some publishers took this as an opportunity to create titles which publish work for a fee which they claimed was an Open Access payment.

Legitimate Open Access payments cover a range of things such as lost publisher revenue and editorial services. Although peer review is carried out for free, the publisher needs to facilitate this which often is included in the associated publication costs. One of the major reasons why predatory publishers are a problem is that they don't offer peer review (even when they claim to).

## Problem publishing

Peer review is the main quality control procedure for academic research. Under the traditional system an output is read through by experts in the field who will look at the quality of both the writing and the underlying work and assess the research for any problems. This gives publishers a chance to spot and correct errors before publication and helps to preserve the integrity and quality of published academic research.

The examples on the screen are articles taken from predatory publishers. This first one describes in medical detail which part of the cell which gives the Jedi their powers, this outlines the impact of chocolate in breakfast cereals and the last example is written by a few of the characters in the Simpsons.

Although these are intentionally humorous examples there is a serious point to showing them. The titles that these were published in claimed they only published high-quality peer reviewed research but obviously if they did then these articles should never have made it through to print!

## Individual impact

Not only does this perpetuate bad research but it can also affect individual researchers. Even if their work is the best it can be, publishing in these predatory journals means it's potentially sitting alongside work which is factually inaccurate, published as a joke or just bad! This can have a negative impact on an individual's reputation and at best means that they have lost the chance to publish it elsewhere. As with many other types of publication the researcher is likely to sign over the copyright to their work when they publish with one of these titles. Even if they subsequently discover that the title is predatory there is very little they can do about it. Thinking about how much work goes into an article or other output it seems a shame that the researcher can't then publish it somewhere better. Although rare, publication with these titles has meant that researchers sustain long term damage to their reputation and citations from these titles certainly add nothing to an academic CV.

## [Editorial board]

Some predatory publishers have other tactics which can impact a researcher's reputation. This is a screenshot of the editorial board of a journal which was looking to recruit researchers to join them or at least publish. To encourage them it gives a list of members together with their contact details and research interests, fairly standard with a regular journal editorial board.

However there are some problems with this particular board and I want to draw your attention to these three people who I've circled here.

### **[Editorial board 2]**

This example was actually reported to be by someone who found it online and recognised some of the images. Menua Paraskevas is actually Dr Rachel Coup, the Head of Academic planning and Ralph Hacene is Stephen Toope, the Vice Chancellor of Cambridge! I did some more digging and found that Samuel Vesnin is actually a stock photo of a man holding a business card so I doubt that he is on the editorial board either.

This is one example of the lengths some publishers will go to trick researchers into publishing with them. They take photos they find online and make up people for their non-existent editorial boards. There have also been examples where real researchers and academics have been listed as on boards that they have never heard of – all tactics to enhance the reputation of an unscrupulous journal.

Another tactic to be wary of is the predatory conference. Many publishers are branching out into events where they will invite people to speak and chair sessions at various events held around the world. Often the attendee will be paying for their own attendance only to find that there are six other conferences by the same publisher being held in the same hotel and the only attendees are other people who have been invited to present. These events have little or no academic merit and are a waste of money and opportunity.

### **[Court judgement]**

These publishers have been a growing problem for years but word is spreading and people are starting to take notice of some of the less than savoury practices. One of the largest problem publishers is the OMICS Publishing Group which operates a number of journal titles and conferences. Over the years there have been complaints from researchers about poor practices and the fact that the events offered by the group are less than professional. In April 2019 the case came to court in the US and a judge ruled that OMICS were guilty of deceiving researchers by falsely including them on editorial boards and encouraging them to publish in journal titles which didn't offer the services they claimed to. The company were ordered to pay \$50 million in damages to the researchers involved but as they are based in India and the ruling was in the US so it's unclear if any money will change hands but it does at least help to raise awareness of problem practices. It's also one of the biggest legal judgements on this type of practice and it does set a precedent which others can follow.

## When are they not a problem?

In the interests of balance we need to look at the other side of the argument. Not all of these publishers operate the kind of predatory tactics we've been talking about and some people consider that they are providing a service which is very much needed – something that might seem strange after the previous section of the webinar!

### Legitimate business model

Firstly, we need to think about the researcher's individual circumstances including where they're based in the world. There is an argument to be made that researchers at some institutions have more resources to support legitimate publication. Taking Cambridge as an example, there are people across the University dedicated to providing training and advice on every aspect of the publication process so researchers have every opportunity to learn about how to avoid problems. Smaller institutions may not be able to offer their researchers this level of support, especially if they are based in countries which don't have a lot of money. Researchers in countries with developing educational ecosystems such as Africa and parts of Asia are producing great work but they often fall victim to predatory publishers as they don't know the signs to watch for.

The country context also plays an important part in a researcher's motivation to publish. In some countries they need to have one or more publications on their CV in order to progress in their careers and so it makes sense for them to use one of these publishers to get their work out there. Different systems of reward for academic work lead to different behaviours in researchers and we need to make sure we're not just looking at it through the lens of our own bias. If a researcher just needs to have their work published to progress but they don't really care how or where and they are prepared to pay then is using one of these publishers a problem? Following the traditional route to publication means waiting ages for peer review and facing the possibility of rejection before finally finding someone willing to publish. In these circumstances is paying for publication acceptable?

This leads to some people arguing that what these publishers are actually doing is fulfilling a need for some researchers and that this is just a new business model which is part of the changing publishing landscape. I'll leave you to explore the evidence and reach your own conclusions about whether you think these publishers deserve to be called predatory or not.

## Warning signs to watch for

However you view these publishers it always pays to be cautious and assess any offers to publish. There are some warning signs to watch out for which might lead researchers to think again about a potential approach.

## Signs to watch for

The general signs will probably be familiar to anyone who has published before but early career researchers looking to share their work for the first time often fall foul of some of them. One handy resource which you can point researchers to is the website Think. Check. Submit. which outlines all of the potential problems to watch for.

As we talked about earlier in the webinar, predatory publishers often send out mass emails to researchers offering to publish their work. These emails tend to be overly flattering and contain a lot of language like “you’re one of the most eminent scholars in your field” or “we would be so excited to publish your ground-breaking work”. To researchers eager to make their mark or those who have been through a lot of rejections this can be an extremely tempting offer. This flattering language might set alarm bells ringing as many publishers opt for a more professional tone but we shouldn’t forget potential cultural differences here. If English is not someone’s first language then they may use phrasing that native speakers would find strange so don’t judge invitations too harshly on that alone.

Another sign of a problem is a publisher who produces titles covering a vast range of topics. Some of these firms claim to publish on anything from astronomy to zoology and traffic management to library studies. It’s common to see publishers expanding their subject coverage but these usually have some type of relation to each other. If a publisher offers an extensive list of diverse titles that may indicate that they’re more interested in making money from all the fees they can collect than publishing research in a certain area.

Asking for any type of submission fee might be another indication of a problem. Open Access fees are increasingly common but other types of fee that are asked for should start to raise a red flag. These are often referred to as hidden fees, which can be by their nature, hard to spot. Publishers should be upfront about any fees and details should be available on their website. If this isn’t the case then researchers should email the publisher to check any potential fees prior to signing paperwork.

The final warning sign to watch for is the major giveaway with predatory publishers – publication turnaround times that appear too good to be true. This is especially important if the publisher claims to be offering peer review as this takes time when done properly. It’s not uncommon to see predatory publishers offering acceptance of

a manuscript at the start of the week and claiming it will be reviewed, copyedited and published by the weekend. The bottom line is that if something seems too good to be true then it probably is!

## **Problem publisher checklist**

What follows for the rest of the webinar is a checklist that researchers and librarians can use to identify potential problem publishers. One caveat to this list – none of the factors should be taken in isolation as there may be very good reasons why a publisher will fail on one or more criteria. In fact, if this checklist and other criteria are used to assess legitimate publishers they are likely to fail on at least one or two points!

## **Transparency**

Publishers should be open and transparent about their practices, both as a way to encourage new submissions and as part of protecting research integrity. This includes contact information (to an official looking address) as well as an outline of how it operates, the topics it covers and why these have been chosen. Any invitation to publish work or attend a conference should be professional and come from a named individual with an official email address. Offers coming from accounts such as Gmail or Yahoo should be treated with caution. It's not unheard of for these publishers to clone the names of established journals to fool people into sending in work but if this name comes attached to a generic Gmail address this should give cause for concern.

## **Fees**

In a similar way, any fees the author is expected to cover should be clearly explained and easy to find on a website. If researchers need to click through seven pages to find information on fees this might indicate that the publisher is trying to hide something (or just that they are bad at website design!). Authors should also be wary of any hidden fees that crop up in a publication agreement, for example the need to purchase a certain number of copies. This has caught out many researchers who then find that they are legally obliged to pay out.



## Copyright

Open Access publishing often allows authors to keep the copyright to their work whilst granting permission for the publisher to produce it. This is done by assigning an open licence of some type and sometimes these are stipulated by those funding the research. Any publisher should outline the rights of the author in any publication agreement, including if a Creative Commons licence is allowed. It's important that researchers make sure that any licence complies with the expectations of funder requirements or they could find themselves in hot water!

## Peer review

As we've discussed, one of the main issues with predatory publishers is their lack of peer review. The process used for review, including predicted timescales, should be outlined by the publisher and researchers should always make it a point to look at these. There are several different types of peer review from double blind to open and this needs to be explained. Make sure that any timescales are realistic. It's impossible to carry out decent peer review overnight so researchers should be cautious, no matter how desperate they are to get something in print. Short timescales might indicate that there is little or no peer review taking place and this should mean alarm bells are ringing. It's also a good idea to make sure that any metrics like Journal Impact Factor that have been given are correct as it's not unusual for these journals to inflate or even make up numbers to make themselves sound more impressive.

## Editorial board

As we saw earlier in the webinar, it's all too easy to create a fake editorial board for a journal so it pays to double check names if researchers are in any doubt. This can often be done with a quick online search or even a reverse image search if they think there might be a problem. Editorial board members should be listed along with a named Editor in Chief who is responsible for the journal title. These names might be familiar to others in the same field and they are likely to list their affiliation on their own website if it's legitimate. Don't be afraid to contact members if you believe there's a problem. Board members are often happy to answer general queries and in fact it's part of their role. This can also be a good way to check that these people know they're listed on the Board although that question should be approached with caution rather than just emailing a stranger and asking them!

## **Association membership**

Some publishers are connected to recognised institutions such as a university press or an established institution and this can provide a lot of reassurance for the nervous researcher. If there is a link to a legitimate organisation chances are the publisher is also legitimate but it's a good idea to remember that some journals falsely claim a link and others will clone names to trick researchers. For example, the Journal of Biology will become the American Journal of Biology or the International Journal of Biology to encourage those familiar with the original title to submit.

## **Website quality**

Most publications have some form of web presence and this is often where researchers can get a lot of information about the journal. A professional journal should have a correspondingly professional web presence and researchers can use this and any emails to assess whether they would be willing to publish with the title. Errors in spelling and grammar may also indicate a problem but researchers should remember cultural differences here. What looks polished and professional to someone from a Western institution may be out of reach for those in other countries or titles which have just started up.

## **Indexing**

As with membership of a recognised association, having a publisher or a journal appear in a recognised database can help to reassure researchers. If the researcher is happy with the criteria for inclusion in a database then they should also be happy with the particular title. Some newer titles will not yet be indexed in the typical databases in a field as these take time to build up but researchers can always look at titles by the same publisher to see if they have been included.

## **Quality of previous publications**

Perhaps the biggest indication of whether the publisher is predatory is the quality of their previous publications. Researchers should look at other titles and individual works produced by a publisher to see if this would be something they would read and whether they would be happy to have their own work published alongside it. Poorly written or factually incorrect content may not be something that a researcher would want to be associated with. Researchers and librarians should also look at the titles and abstracts of the works to test for errors in terminology which might indicate that the publishers were not familiar with the field. If this had happened at the review

stage for the Star Was article we saw earlier it would never have made it through to publication. Researchers can also obviously search online for the name of the title and the word predatory to see if other people have complained about the work. As with any other online review it pays to do some proper investigation rather than taking it merely at face value.

### **Trust your judgement**

In conclusion the best thing you can do when dealing with predatory or problem publishers is to trust your judgement. No matter how new researchers or librarians are to this area they will know when something doesn't feel right. If something feels wrong then chances are that it probably is so always listen to that little voice at the back of your head. This webinar has hopefully given you tools and techniques to make your own judgements about individual publishers which can help you to avoid all types of problem publishers in the future.