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BRIEF REPORT

Analysis of thirteen predatory publishers: a trap for eager-to-publish researchers

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To demonstrate a strategy employed by predatory publishers to trap eager-to-publish authors or researchers into submitting their work.

Methods: This was a case study of 13 potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publishers with similar characteristics. Eleven publishers were included from Beall's list and two additional publishers were identified from a Google web search. Each publisher's site was visited and its content analyzed. Publishers publishing biomedical journals were further explored and additional data was collected regarding their volumes, details of publications and editorial-board members.

Results: Overall, the look and feel of all 13 publishers was similar including names of publishers, web-site addresses, homepage content, homepage images, list of journals and subject areas, as if they were copied and pasted. There were discrepancies in article-processing charges within the publishers. None of the publishers identified names in their contact details and primarily included only email addresses. Author instructions were similar across all 13 publishers. Most publishers listed journals of varied subject areas including biomedical journals (12 publishers) covering different geographic locations. Most biomedical journals published none or very few articles. The highest number of articles published by any single biomedical journal was 28. Several editorial-board members were listed across more than one journals, with one member listed 81 times in different 69 journals (i.e. twice in 12 journals).

Conclusion: There was a strong reason to believe that predatory publishers may have several publication houses with different names under a single roof to trap authors from different geographic locations.

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Open access; publication ethics; questionable journal; scientific publishing

Introduction

In the last few years a new threat, predatory publishers and journals, has started targeting eager-to-publish authors and researchers by offering faster peer review, which is seldom provided, and quick publishing. Jeffrey Beall, a research librarian from the University of Colorado, coined the term “predatory” to define questionable open-access publishers and standalone journals, that promise but do not provide services that are expected from a legitimate publisher or standalone journal. Beall used to maintain lists of potential, possible, or probable predatory publishers and standalone journals along with lists of misleading metrics and hijacked journals; however, in January 2017, he withdrew all his lists and content from his website (<https://scholarlyoa.com>) without giving any reason¹. Hijacked journals are bogus websites that mimic legitimate journals, and fraudulently publish papers by receiving fees. Beall also lists more than 50 characteristics he used to identify these predatory publishers and standalone journals; however, he clarifies that these are not unambiguous criteria but reflect poor practices².

Predatory publishers generally publish more than one journal; however, standalone journals publish only one journal. These predatory publishers use different strategies to attract

authors to submit their work, and young and eager-to-publish authors or researchers fall into the trap. These strategies include: sending a call for papers with highlighting features, faster publication, use of misleading metrics or impact factors, list of indexing services, certificate of publication, no submission charges (only article processing charges [APCs]) or minimal charges. Additionally, these publishers and journals accept manuscripts from a wide subject area. Overall, this means if an eager-to-publish author or researcher visits a journal's site, he/she ends up in submitting a paper.

It was observed that few of the publishers listed on Beall's list of potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publishers were similar in their content and appearance. This paper presents an analysis of 13 such potential, possible, or probable predatory publishers demonstrating another strategy employed to trap eager-to-publish authors or researchers to submit their work.

Methods

This was a case study of 13 potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publishers conducted between January and February 2017. Jeffrey Beall's list was accessed from web archives which included 1150 publishers³.

Each of the publisher sites was visited and based on homepage content 11 publishers were shortlisted for the analysis. An additional two publishers with similar characteristics were identified from a Google web search and included in the analysis making the total of 13. Inclusion criteria included similar look and feel of the publishers' website, including similarity in a web address, the theme of the homepage, similarity of information and its placement, and similarity in tabs. Each publisher site was visited and the following data was collected: screenshots of the homepage, journal categories published by each of the publishers (including number of journals in each category), home page information (including year of copyright, indexing details, publisher license year), contact information and location of publisher, author instructions, and APC specified on the publisher homepage.

Publishers listing biomedical journals were further explored and additional data was collected as follows: number of biomedical journals, issues published by each journal per year, total number of articles published by each journal, details of editorial board members, APCs (specified in each journal), International Standard Serial Number (ISSN) details (if available), and details of the first and latest issue published. Details of editorial board members were revisited to see if there were any duplicates, i.e. same editorial board or any member listed in more than one journal. The data collection was done by only one researcher. Data from each website was collected in an Excel spreadsheet and presented using descriptive (summary) statistics.

Results

Of the total 13 publishers, one publisher published only one journal and did not publish any biomedical journal hence was excluded from detailed biomedical journals analysis. Overall, the look and feel of all 13 publishers were similar as shown in Supplementary Figure 1. Names of publishers, website addresses, homepage content, homepage images, and public notices were similar. None of these publishers' journals were listed in Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Only one publisher (Academic and Scientific Publishing) mentioned that its journals are indexed in Google Scholar and J-Gate. All the publishers were licensed from 2012 to 2015 (Supplementary Figure 2).

Article processing charges

All publishers' APCs specified on the main page, except for Academic and Scientific Publishing and Universal Medical Sciences Publishing, were different based on the economy of countries and ranged from 80 USD to 300 USD for low to high income countries, respectively. Academic and Scientific Publishing mentioned APCs as 300 USD but did not specify for low to high income countries. Universal Medical Sciences Publishing did not specify any charges. Overall, there was a difference in APCs specified on the publishers' main sites and those specified on each journal's site (Table 1).

Contact details and location of the publisher

None of the publishers identified any name in the publisher contact details. Contact details primarily included location and an email address. Location (country of publisher) was not specified for two publishers. The majority ($n = 9$) of locations included US as at least one location (Table 1).

Author instructions

Author instructions were similar across all 13 publishers as if copied and pasted with only minor changes in the publisher's name. For all the publishers, journal manuscript submission was via email. None of the author instructions talk about authorship criteria, consent forms, ethics committee approval, consent from patients, plagiarism, duplicate publication, etc. but these mention that "Papers must be submitted original work. The submitted author is responsible for ensuring that the article's has been approved by the other co-authors and affiliation" (sic). Author instructions primarily explained how to format the manuscript, font size, etc. About the peer review process, these publishers mentioned that "submitted article will send to review process and review report will send for authors if needed any modification or change" (sic). None of the instructions guide on the types of articles (reviews, case report, letter to editors, etc.).

Subject area and journal names

All the publishers intended to publish journals of varied subject areas like agricultural science, and medical science and public health. The numbers of journals published under each subject area are summarized in Table 2. Five publishers also published similar journals, but did not separate them and listed journals in alphabetical order. Overall, the numbers of journals in each category were comparable across the publishers. The highest number of journals was from the general science category, followed by medical science and public health (Table 2).

The majority of journals published by these publishers used a specific term for naming most of their journals (Table 1) e.g. Canadian Research Publication named their journals starting with the term "Canadian Open". The list of journals appears to be the same with only the changes in these terms from publisher to publisher.

Biomedical journals and their editorial boards

Overall, 12 of the 13 publishers publish biomedical journals and were further evaluated (Table 3). Three publishers who listed 76, 76 and 204 biomedical journals did not publish any article. Four other publishers who listed 77, 76, 133, and 113 biomedical journals published only 1, 3, 2, and 2 articles, respectively. The remaining five publishers published 11, 12, 13, 36, and 44 articles. The highest number of articles published in any journal was 28, published by Canadian Open Orthopaedics and Traumatology Journal (publisher: Canadian

Table 1. Summary of thirteen predatory publishers.

SR no.	Publisher	Website	Location of publisher	APCs on publisher main site (USD)	APCs in each journal (USD)	Nomenclature of journals (sample text)
1	Academic and Scientific Publishing	www.acascpub.com	USA	300	300	International Journal OR International Open Journal
2	Science and Technology Publishing	www.scitecpub.com	USA	HIC, 300; UMIC, 220; LMIC, 120; LIC, 80	300	Open Research Journal OR Research Open Journal
3	American Research Publications	www.arepub.com	USA	HIC, 300; UMIC, 220; LMIC, 120; LIC, 80	300	US Open
4	Research and Knowledge Publication	www.rekpub.com	USA	HIC, 300; UMIC, 220; LMIC, 120; LIC, 80	300	American Open
5	Canadian Research Publication	www.crpup.com	Canada	HIC, 300; UMIC, 220; LMIC, 120; LIC, 80	300	Canadian Open
6	Academic Knowledge and Research Publishing	www.akrpub.com	USA	HIC, 300; UMIC, 220; LMIC, 120; LIC, 80	200	Academic Open
7	Eurasian Research Publishing	www.erepub.com	Canada and Bangladesh	HIC, 300; UMIC, 220; LMIC, 120; LIC, 80	200	Eurasian
8	European Union Research Publishing	www.eurpub.com	UK and USA	HIC, 300; UMIC, 220; LMIC, 120; LIC, 80	300	European Open
9	North American Research Publishing	www.narpub.com	Canada and USA	HIC, 300; UMIC, 220; LMIC, 120; LIC, 80	HIC, 300; UMIC, 220; LMIC, 120; LIC, 80	North American Open
10	British Open Research Publications	www.borpub.com	UK and USA	HIC, 300; UMIC, 220; LMIC, 120; LIC, 80	200	British Open Journal
11	World Current Research Publishing	www.wcrpub.com	Not Specified	HIC, 300; UMIC, 220; LMIC, 120; LIC, 80	Not specified	World Open
12	Asian and American Research Publishing Group	www.aarpub.com	USA	HIC, 300; UMIC, 220; LMIC, 120; LIC, 80	200	Asian American
13	Universal Medical Sciences Publishing ^a	www.umspub.com	Not Specified	HIC, 300; UMIC, 220; LMIC, 120; LIC, 80	Not specified	Canadian Open

Abbreviations. APCs, article processing charges; HIC, high-income countries; LIC, low-income countries; LMIC, lower-middle-income countries; UMIC, upper-middle-income countries; USD, United States dollar.

Location of publisher was as specified in contact details.

^aOnly one journal.

Table 2. Publishers and their subject areas.

SR no.	Publisher	Agricultural science	Business and management	Computer science	Engineering science	Environment and earth	Energy and power	General science	Medical science and public health	Science and technology	Sociology and arts	Total
1	Academic and Scientific Publishing	45	28	32	65	39	14	129	65	32	37	486
2	Science and Technology Publishing	37	25	19	54	31	13	121	61	24	36	421
3	American Research Publications	40	26	26	72	43	15	128	83	28	37	498
4	Research and Knowledge Publication					430 ^a						430
5	Canadian Research Publication	42	28	22	70	39	13	124	62	27	40	467
6	Academic Knowledge and Research Publishing	53	33	26	73	38	15	135	76	32	40	521
7	Eurasian Research Publishing	54	34	26	74	42	16	133	76	33	43	531
8	European Union Research Publishing	26	33	26	75	43	16	136	77	32	46	540
9	North American Research Publishing	54	35	27	73	40	15	132	76	32	43	527
10	British Open Research Publications					682 ^a						682
11	World Current Research Publishing					1183 ^a						1183
12	Asian and American Research Publishing Group					472 ^a						472
13	Universal Medical Sciences Publishing					1						1

^aPublishers publish similar journals of similar subject areas but do not separate them and list the journals in alphabetical order.

Research Publication). No journal published any editorial in any biomedical journal.

Overall, the editorial board's composition was incomplete for all the journals. None of journals from any publisher identified a member as editor-in-chief. All journals from three publishers had no editorial members. All 12 publishers had at least one journal that had no editorial board members. Five publishers had ≤ 5 and three publishers had < 10 editorial board members on their journals. One publisher,

Academic and Scientific Publishing, had 17 journals with 1–5 editorial board members, 19 journals with 6–10 editorial board members, 14 journals with 11–20 editorial board members, and 3 journals with 21–40 editorial board members.

The majority of the editorial board members were listed in more than one journal; however, there were few editorial board members who were listed in ≥ 10 different journals from a particular publisher. Overall, there were five such publishers where editorial board members were listed in ≥ 10

Table 3. Summary of biomedical journals.

SR no.	Publisher	Biomedical journals published, <i>N</i>	No. of articles published, total (range)	Number of journals with no publication to date	Editor-in-chief	Number of editorial board members				
						0	1–5	6–10	11–20	21–40
1	Academic and Scientific Publishing	65	12 (1–4)	57	No	12	17	19	14	3
2	Science and Technology Publishing	61	13 (1–4)	53	No	25	31	5	0	0
3	American Research Publications	83	36 (1–9)	69	No	1	74	8	0	0
4	Research and Knowledge Publication	96	11 (1–4)	90	No	60	35	1	0	0
5	Canadian Research Publication	62	44 (1–28)	56	No	43	19	0	0	0
6	Academic Knowledge and Research Publishing	76	0	76	No	63	13	0	0	0
7	Eurasian Research Publishing	76	0	76	No	76	0	0	0	0
8	European Union Research Publishing	77	1 (1–1)	75	No	75	2	0	0	0
9	North American Research Publishing	76	3 (1–1)	7	No	4 (66 error) ^a	6	0	0	0
10	British Open Research Publications	133	2 (1–1)	131	No	133	0	0	0	0
11	World Current Research Publishing	204	0	204	No	204	0	0	0	0
12	Asian and American Research Publishing Group	113	2 (2–2)	112	No	109	4	0	0	0

^aSixty-six non-working links.**Table 4.** Duplication of editorial board members (presented if member is listed in more than 10 journals).

SR no.	Publisher	Biomedical journals published, <i>N</i>	No. of journals with at least one editorial board member	Editorial board members				
				Member 1	Member 2	Member 3	Member 4	Member 5
1	Academic and Scientific Publishing	65	53	16	20	14	18 (×2) ^a	10
2	Science and Technology Publishing	61	36	16	14	14	13	–
3	American Research Publications	83	82	62	63	69 + 12 ^b	–	–
4	Research and Knowledge Publication	96	36	12	–	–	–	–
5	Canadian Research Publication	62	19	11	–	–	–	–
6	Academic Knowledge and Research Publishing	76	13	–	–	–	–	–
7	Eurasian Research Publishing	76	0	–	–	–	–	–
8	European Union Research Publishing	77	2	–	–	–	–	–
9	North American Research Publishing	76	6	–	–	–	–	–
10	British Open Research Publications	133	0	–	–	–	–	–
11	World Current Research Publishing	204	0	–	–	–	–	–
12	Asian and American Research Publishing Group	113	4	–	–	–	–	–

^aThis member was listed twice in 18 journals.^bThis member was listed in 69 journals and twice in 12 of 69 journals.

different journals (Table 4). Academic and Scientific Publishing had five such members who were listed in ≥ 10 different journals. Science and Technology Publishing had four members, American Research Publications had three members (member 1, 81 times [twice in 12 journals hence 81 times in 69 journals]; member 2, 63 times; member 3, 62 times), Research and Knowledge Publication and Canadian Research Publication had one such member (12 times and 11 times, respectively) who was listed in ≥ 10 different journals.

Discussion

This case study demonstrated that the publishers included in this analysis appeared as if they were operated by the same team or person. Overall, the look and feel of the websites and their content were similar. This demonstrates that predatory or questionable publishers may create multiple publishing sites to trap authors with widespread scientific subjects, region specific publications, and using fancy journal names similar to legitimate journals. Examples are: American Research Publications, to trap authors from the United States,

which uses journals starting with “US Open”; North American Research Publishing for North Americans; European Union Research Publishing for Europeans; and so on. Other authors, not falling under any of these categories, will then be trapped by generic names such as Science and Technology Publishing, World Current Research Publishing, etc. If an author or researcher plans to submit a manuscript and starts searching for a potential target journal, it is possible that he/she will come across any of these journals and may end up submitting work unknowingly and becoming a victim. And if these publishers fail to trap authors, they may shut their business and open a new publication house with the same set of journals with slight modification of journal names and the trap continues.

The list of predatory publishers in Beall’s list has grown significantly from 18 in 2011, 614 in 2014, 693 in 2015 and now 1150 in 2016 before it was withdrawn^{3–5}. This increase is an increasing threat to the scientific community. The only watchdog of such publishers, Jeffrey Beall, withdrew his lists without providing any notice in January 2017, which was bad news for the scientific community. This list was a guide for researchers when they needed a second opinion on a

suspicious publisher or journal and unfortunately it is no longer available and updated. His work is much appreciated and has raised significant awareness on how to identify and avoid predatory journals and publishers; however, there is a long way to go.

There are several organizations and societies like the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), and Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA) who have extended their activities to increase awareness about predatory journals and promote best practices⁶⁻⁸. Several editorials and commentaries have been published in the past few years, and it has been discussed in several conferences⁹⁻¹⁷. However, currently there is no control on their increasing volume. Jeffrey Beall suggests banning predatory publishers by not providing licenses to journal-management software or standard identifiers; scholarly databases should raise their acceptance criteria and remove those who use flawed peer review¹⁸.

It has been highlighted that predatory publishing is a threat to non-mainstream science countries, which is supported by the wasteful publishing and unethical editing agencies¹⁷. Recently, a declaration was published to upgrade the standards of the editing and publishing of scholarly journals across Balkan and Mediterranean countries¹⁹. This declaration expects that the "endorsement and enforcement of the Sarajevo Declaration may help avoid 'wasteful' or unethical publishing practices and improve visibility, scientific prestige, and indexability of the adherent scholarly publications"¹⁹.

There could be a few predatory journals and publishers who have started their journals with a scientific interest, but are lacking in adhering to best practices and may improve in the future and can be considered as legitimate publishers and journals.

It has been evident and discussed that predatory publisher locations are generally not the same as stated on their websites. In the present study, the majority of publisher locations were cited as US. Additionally, but not surprisingly, none of the publishers had any name in the contact details. Overall, these characteristics are consistent with Jeffrey Beall's criteria specified for the identification of predatory journals and publishers².

In the present study, all the 12 publishers were intending to publish journals of varied fields that we can generally name. Take a name and they are ready with the journal. It was also evident that there was inconsistency in APCs in the majority of publishers. The APCs, which ranged from 80 to 300 USD, also demonstrate that these publishers showcase themselves as if they care for low income countries and waive some fees for them. In the study by Shen and Björk⁵ the average APCs were found to be 605 USD for publishers publishing more than 100 journals, and 239 USD for publishers publishing 10 to 99 journals. These APCs were comparatively higher than observed in the present study.

Author instructions were in name only and just included formatting and non-important instructions and were similar among all publishers. None of the publishers included any guidance on publication ethics. Submission of manuscript via email was another indicator, but not explicitly, of poor journal practices of predatory journals.

Overall, several publishers published few or no articles in biomedical journals, though each of the publishers had >60 biomedical journals. Additionally, the majority of journals had no editorial members and none of the journals had an editor-in-chief. Many publishers listed the same editorial member in more than one journal. One editorial board member was listed in 69 journals and was listed twice in 12 journals. Jeffrey Beall has previously raised concern about duplicate editorial board members (i.e. the same editorial board for more than one journal), and the present analysis demonstrates and confirms such poor journal practices by predatory publishers. Scientists or researchers listed as editorial board members, in most of the cases, are unaware that their name is being used in one or more journals and when they ask to remove their name these predatory publishers generally do not respond.

The author acknowledges the following limitations of this analysis. Use of Beall's list of predatory publishers for this analysis can be questioned as the list no longer exists after Beall withdrew it. However, it was available from Web Archive³. Hence, this was the best available source to start looking for questionable publishers and journals. Inclusion of publishers in this analysis was based on their homepage appearance which might have excluded a few publishers, if there were any. Several links were non-working or their domains were for sale; these numbers were not captured. It is possible that publishers might have disappeared with their publication houses owing to being listed in Jeffrey Beall's list or due to few or no submissions. The second part of our analysis was limited to biomedical journals; hence, the results need to be extrapolated with care for other journals; however, the outcomes may not be significantly different. Another limitation was that the data collection was done by only one researcher which leaves room for error. Hence, readers should take these numbers as estimates. Several editorial board members were listed in more than one journal; however, it was out of scope of this study to verify whether these members were listed with or without their knowledge. Further work would be needed to study these gaps.

Conclusion

There was a strong reason to believe that predatory publishers may have several publication houses under a single roof to trap researchers from different geographic locations with a single interest (only financial gain). There is a need to continually raise awareness on this topic among researchers to make them think, check, and then submit their work to a legitimate journal for consideration.

Transparency

Declaration of funding

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Declaration of financial/other relationships

P.B. has disclosed that he is an employee of Tata Consultancy Services, Mumbai; however, the views presented in this paper are those of the

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