Predatory Publishing: A Growing Threat to Scholarly Publishing

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Abstract

Publishing in academia is an important aspect of those that are identified with it. Besides teaching and researching, scholars are required to communicate their research through publishing. Consequently, academic publishing has led to the exploitation of the open access publishing model, which in turn has resulted in the influx of predatory publishing. Using a literature review methodology, this article examines Open Access predatory publishing and its impact on scholarly communication. Findings show that predatory publishing is posing an increasing threat to academic credibility and to individual academic reputation. The review further highlights that predatory publishing is not limited to early-career researchers only, but to all authors who are unfamiliar with practices in pseudo journals. By sensitising scholars about the nature of predatory publishing, librarians can support researchers to practice safe publishing.

Keywords: Scholarly Communication, Open Access Predatory Journals, and Publishers

1. INTRODUCTION

Oxford English Dictionary (2020) describes academia as an environment or community concerned with the pursuit of research, education, and scholarship. Any research results in communication of the results through publishing, now associated with the phrase "Publish or perish". McCabe (2013) calls it a 'win or lose situation" depending on whether one is discoverable on major scholarly search engines like Google scholar or not. In the interest of publishing, distribution platforms have evolved alongside technology, leading to the existence of Open Access (OA) publishing models. It is however unfortunate to note that the OA publishing model has been exploited by predatory publishers that use avenues that are not accepted in the scientific publishing. This paper, therefore, examines predatory publishing (publishers and journals) and its impact on scholarly publishing.

1.1 Background of scholarly publishing

Communication is fundamental to the pursuit of scholarly research and publishing. Researchers are mandated to formally communicate their research output by publishing in scholarly platforms

such as books, journals, repositories, conferences, theses, and dissertations. According to Coan (2017), publishing is critical for the survival and career development of scholars just as it is for publishers.

Scholarly publishing has undergone a fundamental revolution owing to the advanced application of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the researchers' thirst to communicate their research findings globally. Today electronic delivery of scholarly journals via e-licensing has dominated the journal subscription business model (Shen & Björk, 2015). This transformation has resulted in prospects of more radical revenue models. According to Shen and Björk (2015), some publishers repositioned themselves as service providers to the authors through publishing rather than simply providing the content. In this type of model, authors pay the publishers for making their work freely accessible to everyone online. This was the birth of the OA publishing model.

OA advocates free availability and accessibility of peer-reviewed scholarly work via the Internet, permitting any user to access or link to full text or use them for any lawful purpose, without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the Internet itself (Australasian Open Access Strategy Group, 2016).

OA scholarly publishing uses two major platforms, namely: subject-based repositories and OA journals. Subject-based platforms may include the Social Science Research Network (SSRN) and PubMed Central for medicine while repositories may include institutional repositories of universities like University of Zambia Institutional Repository, also known as 'green' OA publishing. These take a self-archiving process and authors do not need to pay for publishing in them (https://www.enago.com/academy/a-guide-to-self-archiving-for-young-research-scientists/).

Alternatively, researchers could publish in an OA scholarly journal; a platform or model referred to as 'gold' open access publishing. In this model, the researcher/author pays the publisher an "article processing charge" (APC) for making their work freely available and accessible online. Furthermore, today's majority subscription journals from renowned publishers make individual articles available after payment, a model known as hybrid OA. Another strand of OA is called Diamond or platinum open access where both the author and readers do not pay any money to the

Journal for the publication and access is immediate. Usually, Diamond OA is used by publishers who want to emphasise the importance of research availability rather than making money.

The use of OA publishing platforms in the last decade has drastically increased the number of articles available online and some journals have reached a high scientific standing in their field. Conversely, this pay-to-publish model has created opportunities where researchers have been and can be misled by some publishers using avenues that are not accepted in scientific publishing. Beall (2017) invented the idiom 'predatory publishers' to describe pseudo-publishers and journals. Today predatory publishing has become a big threat to academic publishing globally. It has seriously undermined the value of legitimate scholarly publishing and the integrity of OA publishing, leaving many researchers under the impression that all OA platforms deal with low quality, unreliable, or unethical research with a lack of editorial and peer-review rigour. As such, the effects of predatory publishing are being felt by all stakeholders in the publishing community (Coan, 2017).

1.2 Objectives

The main objective of this paper was to examine OA predatory publishing and its impact on scholarly OA publishing. In this regard, the paper sought to:

i. Characterise OA predatory journals,
ii. Highlight the impact of predatory OA journals on scholarly communication,
iii. Discuss tools to help researchers identify predatory OA journals.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This paper is based on a review of literature, mainly on secondary data such as journal articles, books, and other published literature on predatory publishing, publishers, and journals. The research used the Google scholar database to search for articles on predatory publishing and journals. The literature search retrieved 15 resources, which were later screened to extract unique characteristics and themes of the research. These themes, together with the research objectives formed headings and subheadings to allow for systematic presentation and discussion of the results that are presented in the following section.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Predatory publishers and journals

There are several terms used to describe predatory journals and publishers as well as ways in which they manifest. According to Jeffrey Beall, as quoted by Harboe-Ree (2014), predatory OA publishers are those that unprofessionally exploit the gold open-access model for their gain. He calls them pseudo publishers and journals operating as scholarly vanity presses because they mostly publish articles that are not reviewed in exchange for the author's fee. Predatory publishers may also claim to have their names included in reputable OA directories and indexes, which they are not or may include fake members of their editorial boards who may not have agreed to serve as such and are not even aware.

Harboe-Ree (2014) calls predatory publishing unethical or vanity publishing. She defines it as a practice where the authors pay all or most of the costs of publication, often with no retention of rights to their work. Quality controls such as legitimate editing and peer-review processes are compromised.

Bowman (2014) adds that the method of operation of predatory publishing sometimes takes the form of a publisher distributing e-mails asking recipients to submit articles or to serve on the editorial board or even as editor of a new publication with a scientific-sounding title. Bowman (2014) further notes that the success of key OA publishers resulted in another deceptive practice called "citation stacking." One such case was exposed after several Brazilian editors conspired to publish articles containing hundreds of references to papers in each other's journals to elevate the journals' impact factors, with a notion that important articles are likely to be published in journals with high impact factors (Bowman, 2014). When the journals do not provide rigorous peer review and editorial oversight, the rules of academic engagement are thus broken. Clark (2015) observes that predatory journals are fake or scam journals that have been discredited by the scientific community. Because they are not indexed in standard databases, of which they claim to belong, any research published in them is effectively lost. Their motive is financial gain, and their modus operandi is a corruption of the business model of legitimate open access publishing.

3.2 Common characteristics of predatory journals

Here are some common traits among many predatory journals (Beall, 2017, Nicholl & Chinn, 2016, Prater, 2014, Bowman, 2014, Harboe-Ree, 2014, Bohannon, 2013).

3.2.1 Lack of peer review or rapid peer review process

Claims of a thorough peer review process without evidence of any peer review conducted. There is no evidence of selectivity or screening based on the editorial or quality checks as all submissions appear to be accepted (Beall, 2017 and Harboe-Ree, 2014). Similarly, Shamseer et al (2014) show that even though the predatory journal might offer peer review and editorial services, oftentimes they just collect the APC without providing such services and quickly publish unreviewed work. Bohanonon (2013) reveals a lack of article peer review in 60% of the 304 fee-charging open access journals where he submitted fake scientific papers and had 60% accepted. Beall (2017) adds that predatory publishers have a fast and often fake peer-review process.

3.2.2 Fake editors/editorial boards

Featuring fake editors and editorial boards or listing people as editors without their consent (Beall, 2017 & Harboe-Ree, 2014).

3.3 Fake affiliation

Statement or implication that a journal is affiliated with prestigious institutions and organisations, without their knowledge or consent.

3.3.1 Indexing databases

Bowman (2014) and Clark (2015) indicate an attempt by a journal to give the impression that it is indexed in the key journal indexes such as the Web of Science or Scopus when it is not true May check Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) for verification.

3.3.2 Use of name similar to the credible title of a journal

Share names very similar to an existing and reputable journal or a site such as Index Scientific Journals, which can use the acronym ISI to match the real ISI Web of Science (IFIS 2018). IFIS reveal that a journal can claim to be listed in ISI, but refer to the pay-per-listing site, rather than the real site. Inclusion in these databases is usually granted in exchange for a fee, with an 'Impact Factor' provided for an additional fee. For example, presenting sites such as Research Gate and Mendeley as indexing databases, or claiming Thomson Reuter Researcher IDs, Scopus Researcher IDs, and ORCID accounts in the name of a journal (IFIS 2018 & Bowman 2014).

3.3.3 Journal metrics

The deceptive practices around metrics follow a similar theme to index databases. Through receiving metric awards from predatory databases, journals can make claims of having high 'Impact Factors'. Sometimes Journal may claim to have an impact factor, which does not offer a way of confirming it.

It is important to note that there is only one legitimate 'Impact Factor or journal impact factor (JIF) awarded to journals indexed in the Web of Science, owned by Clarivate Analytics.

3.3.4 Self-citation

Deceptive journals may show very high self-citation rates aimed at inflating their Google Scholar citation metrics. IFIS (2018) adds that there are also journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science that have succeeded in raising their citations resulting from self-citations. This fake impact factor is then used to deceive unsuspecting scholars to publish with them thinking that the portrayed impact factor is legitimate.

3.3.5 Location

Information on legitimate locations or offices of deceptive journals or publishers deliberated either be false or missing (dead links) on the website. In some cases, where postcodes are provided and can be searched on Google maps, the search results either yield nothing, misleading information, or poorly maintained sites (IFIS, 2018 & Bohannon, 2013).

3.3.6 Other characteristics

Other common characteristics of predatory journals and publishers include invitations to publish via overly flattering e-mails, use of broad titles, sometimes combining subject fields that are not normally related, a high acceptance rate of more than 50%, and no ISSN or DOI=digital object identifier (Bohannon, 2013). Lastly, trust your professional judgment.

3.4 Impact of predatory publishing on scholarly communication

Shen and Björk (2015) have argued that predatory publishers have caused a lot of negative publicity for OA journals through their charges for article publications. The spam emails they constantly send out to researchers have become a bother to many while the number of scandals relating to the poor quality of work they publish has increased. They have intentionally not put in

place quality control measures for their publications. This has become a source of worry as most researchers in academia cannot differentiate between a legitimate publisher or journal and a fake one.

Peer review as we all know and appreciate it in academic writing is the quality control measure that publishers conduct to improve the quality of research output made available to others. Peer-review is an essential aspect of publishing that is left out in predatory publishing. One may wonder how much junk the world is exposed to and how difficult genuine OA publishers and journals face proving that they are genuine to the world. This is a huge threat, an uphill battle for academic publishing, which needs to be resolved.

Further, because predatory journals are quick to accept and publish papers, most researchers, especially early career researchers who want to use their publications for promotions get attracted. Consequently, Beall (2017) argues that the solution to predatory publishing lies within the research community. Scholars should resist the temptation to publish quickly while publishers need to be honest in doing their businesses. Beall (2017) further indicates that some predatory publishers have a profit margin higher than established publishers like Elsevier. Similarly, Shen and Björk (2015) state that predatory journals have made it more difficult for genuine OA journals to attract good manuscripts and get accepted to indexes such as Web of Science. They have caused unfounded negative publicity for open access publishing in general as some people cannot easily distinguish between legitimate journals and predatory journals.

3.5 Consequences of publishing in predatory platforms

Publishing research results is a core mandate of academic researchers to advance knowledge and career-building in their respective disciplines. With so many journal models that have come on open access, the aspect of handling quality in academia has become a concern. Often, OA has been discussed and warnings have been issued that predatory publishing is unacceptable and those that publish in them lower the quality and value of their work as such journals are not indexed nor have provisions for long-term archiving.

Publishing in predatory platforms also limits future rights of the author; while in extreme situations it may ruin one's career (Nicholl & Chinn, 2015). Since predatory journals are not indexed in

standard databases they claim to belong, any research published in them is effectively lost. Its discoverability is limited and this just works out to the disadvantage of the researcher.

3.6 Tools to help to identify predatory publishers and journals

Predatory journals are not only a problem for academics and publishers but also for the public. It is therefore important to put in place strategies to fight predatory publishing. An increasing body of research aimed at offering trustworthy methods to help authors identify possible predatory publishing platforms as they select the right journal and publisher to publish their research have been established.

The commonly known, though currently withdrawn by the owner is Beall's list (beallslist.net) of predatory journals and publishers created by Jeffrey Beall on the criteria to determine if a journal is reputable. However, it is worth noting that some researchers have criticized Beall's list that he has no supporting evidence other than on appearances alone. His assumptions or false accusation of nearly one in five as being a 'potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publisher are not valid worldwide, hence cannot be generalized. It is claimed that Beall is biased against open-access journals based in poor countries while the criteria used are inconsistent and ambiguous, biased towards issues relating to poor quality controls. However, Beall's list can still be used as a starting point, but cautiously.

There are also codes of conduct of the OA Scholarly Publishers Association, the Committee on Publication Ethics, the International Association of Scientific, Technical and Medical Publishers, and analysis of publishers' content, practices, and websites (Harboe-Ree, 2014).

Other tools that can be used to identify predatory journals and publishers include the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Scholarly Communication Toolkit. The toolkit is used to evaluate journals for quality check tips and lists using the Think, Check and Submit (TCS) checklist and other additional resources such as the Himmelfarb Health Sciences Library's guide (Research4life MOOC, 2020).

The Think, Check and Submit is an international initiative by a coalition of scholarly publishers and associations aimed at educating researchers, promoting integrity, and building trust in credible research and publishing. It is a simple checklist that researchers can use to assess the credentials

of a journal or a publisher. The 3-step approach encourages researchers to 'Think' about whether the journal to which they are submitting their research is a trusted journal, to 'Check' the journal against a set of criteria to ensure it is right for their work, and to 'Submit' their work only if the journal adheres to certain standards and criteria (https://www.alpsp.org/Think-Check-Submit). This initiative has been very successful in raising awareness and providing an introductory guide to identifying problematic journals.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has examined OA predatory publishing, its impact on scholarly communication, and the role of librarians. Results show that predatory publishing is a growing issue within the OA model because of its detrimental effects on scholarly communication. In this regard, the study recommends the following:

i. Scholars and researchers to be sensitised about predatory practices and to learn to avoid them.
ii. Potential authors and young researchers should be given clear policy guidelines to help them identify potential dubious publishing platforms.

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