



Predatory publishers are corrupting open access

Journals that exploit the author-pays model damage scholarly publishing and promote unethical behaviour by scientists, argues Jeffrey Beall.

When e-mail first became available, it was a great innovation that made communication fast and cheap. Then came spam — and suddenly, the innovation wasn't so great. It meant having to filter out irrelevant, deceptive and sometimes offensive messages. It still does.

The same corruption of a great idea is now occurring with scholarly open-access publishing.

Early experiments with open-access publishing, such as the *Journal of Medical Internet Research* and BioMed Central, were very promising. Set up more than a decade ago, they helped to inspire a social movement that has changed academic publishing for the better, lowered costs and expanded worldwide access to the latest research.

Then came predatory publishers, which publish counterfeit journals to exploit the open-access model in which the author pays. These predatory publishers are dishonest and lack transparency. They aim to dupe researchers, especially those inexperienced in scholarly communication. They set up websites that closely resemble those of legitimate online publishers, and publish journals of questionable and downright low quality. Many purport to be headquartered in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada or Australia but really hail from Pakistan, India or Nigeria.

Some predatory publishers spam researchers, soliciting manuscripts but failing to mention the required author fee. Later, after the paper is accepted and published, the authors are invoiced for the fees, typically US\$1,800. Because the scientists are often asked to sign over their copyright to the work as part of the submission process (against the spirit of open access) they feel unable to withdraw the paper and send it elsewhere.

I monitor predatory publishers on my blog, Scholarly Open Access, which has become a forum in which scientists can raise their concerns over the practice. They send me hundreds of e-mails passing on spam solicitations or asking whether a particular publisher is legitimate.

I also get e-mails from the predators' victims. Some have been named as members of editorial boards without their knowledge or permission. Others have had an article partially or completely plagiarized in a predatory journal. Many ask me for advice on where to publish or how to withdraw an article that they wish they hadn't submitted. As a librarian, I do my best to answer the questions I receive, but they often require expertise in the author's field of study. So it is important that more scientists are made aware of the problem.

The predatory publishers and journals often have lofty titles that make them seem legitimate in a list of publications on a CV. Scholarly publishing's traditional role of vetting the best

research is disappearing. Now there is a journal willing to accept almost every article, as long as the author is willing to pay the fee. Authors, rather than libraries, are the customers of open-access publishers, so a powerful incentive to maintain quality has been removed.

Perhaps nowhere are these abuses more acute than in India, where new predatory publishers or journals emerge each week. They are appearing because of the market need — hundreds of thousands of scientists in India and its neighbouring countries need to get published to earn tenure and promotion.

Here, the problem is not just with the publishers. Scientists themselves are also to blame. Many are taking unethical shortcuts and paying for the publication of plagiarized or self-plagiarized work.

Honest scientists stand to lose the most in this unethical quagmire.

When a researcher's work is published alongside articles that are plagiarized, that report on conclusions gained from unsound methodologies or that contain altered photographic figures, it becomes tainted by association. Unethical scientists gaming the system are earning tenure and promotion at the expense of the honest.

The competition for author fees among fraudulent publishers is a serious threat to the future of science communication. To compete in a crowded market, legitimate open-access publishers are being forced to promise shorter submission-to-publication times; this weakens the peer-review process, which takes time to do properly.

To tackle the problem, scholars must resist the temptation to publish quickly and easily. The research community needs to use scholarly social networks such as Connotea and Mendeley

to identify and share information on publishers that deceive, lack transparency or otherwise fail to follow industry standards. Scientific literacy must include the ability to recognize publishing fraud, and libraries must remove predatory publishers from their online catalogues. The worst offenders can usually be discovered without too much effort: their websites are littered with grammatical errors and they list bogus contact details. The borderline cases are more difficult to spot — here, we need open-access zealots to open their eyes to the growing quality problems.

Conventional scholarly publishers have had an important role in validating research, yet too often advocates of open access seem to overlook the importance of validation in online publishing. They promote access at the expense of quality: a shortcoming that tacitly condones the publication of unworthy scientific research. ■

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