FEATURE ARTICLE  A personal take on events

Predatory Scholarly Publishing:  
A Question of Trust or Fraud

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ABSTRACT
Around the world, Institutions of Higher Learning receive funding based on decisions made through government Research Assessment Exercises. Experts assess the quality of universities by assessing each department in every Institution of Higher Learning. Each article published or book written is reviewed by a group of experts, and will receive quality rating from the highest standard of excellence to a national standard of excellence. The highest world-class standard is given to research published in high-end journals. The quality of articles is decided through the journals in which they are published. This is considered fair practice if the articles have undergone blind reviews. The ISI Web of Science database uses ‘impact factors’ to judge the standard of journals. This paper attempts to share with young academicians the real situation in the world of academic publishing concerning the standard of journals and the articles they contain.

Keywords: Scholarly publishing, Fraud, Predatory, Academic journals, Article-processing charges, Impact factor
Publishing in a Journal

Before a researcher starts thinking about publishing, it is crucial to ensure that the process of publishing is clearly understood. This process begins with the submission of an article to a publisher, after which the article goes through the process detailed in the diagram below:

**Diagram 1**: Submission process of paper for publication in journal

**SUBMISSION OF A MANUSCRIPT**

*If at first you don’t succeed…*

If your manuscript is rejected, don’t give up – everybody has articles rejected. Learn from the editor’s and reviewer’s comments and try again. Use the reviewer’s report to understand why the article wasn’t accepted.

Between 40% and 90% of all manuscripts submitted are rejected before or after external peer review. In some cases, the journal you’ve chosen is simply not the right one. Still, there’s no reason to despair.

**Revision**

The revision process is an important step towards publication.

Your manuscript may be in need of minor or major revisions. This is an excellent opportunity for you to improve your work through dialogue with some of the leading scientists in your field. Read the reviewer’s comments carefully, and discuss them with your collaborators. Prepare a well-written response to the reviewer’s report: address each comment scientifically and objectively.

**Acceptance**

Congratulations! Your manuscript is accepted for publication!

**Re-submission**

You can win half the battle by choosing the right journal. Your manuscript may be just fine but not quite within the scope of the journal. Increasingly, Elsevier journals offer authors the option to have their manuscript automatically submitted to another journal.

Source: [www.elsevier.com/authors](http://www.elsevier.com/authors), p. 15
When the editor of an academic journal receives a paper for publication, he must decide whether the manuscript has the quality to be reviewed by the editorial board or selected external reviewers. Once reviewed, the manuscript will be sent back to the author with a rejection letter or a request for revisions. The author should then make the necessary changes to the manuscript and resubmit it to the editor, who, if necessary, sends the amended manuscript back to external reviewers. After this, the paper, in its final copy, is sent back to the author for editing or proofing before publication. The author, when he is finished, sends the paper back to the publisher, and the paper is finally ready for publication in the journal.

*Figure 1* below shows the process of publishing an article. Peer-reviewed journal articles undergo independent review before publication by professionals in the particular area of research. The independent review focuses on ensuring that the research methodology used is valid and that the data is accurate. However, the independent reviewers or the experts in the field may agree with the conclusion of the author(s).

*Figure 1: Article publication process*
Conventional Journals to Open Access (OA)

Journal content is accessed either through print or online with the traditional model of scholarly publishing. The consumers of the research, generally libraries and individual subscribers, pay for the content in the traditional model, whereas the authors pay nothing. However, new models of scholarly publishing have emerged in the past decade (Crawford, 2011). Some publishers such as Springer's Open Choice or Nature's Scientific Reports have adopted a business model through which authors pay for immediate publication on the Internet but the publishers keep the commercial reuse rights. These publishers offer an open-access option that charges for Internet publication without giving readers full reuse rights. The Open Access (OA) publishing does not take any fee from customers of the research or the university for the right to use, download, distribute or make copies of the article.

So as to ascertain Open Access journals, various sources are used by Thomson Scientific such as: J-Stage [http://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/browse], the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) [www.scielo.br],[www.scielo.isciii.es] and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) at Lund University [www.doaj.org]. These sources list more than 2000 journals. Currently there are over 260 OA journals that meet the Thomson Scientific selection criteria and are covered in the Web of Science. This number of OA journals is growing speedily. There have been many new journals that have started adopting the OA model, and active journals are switching their business model to OA. This shift towards OA in all likelihood will become entrenched and eventually, it is believed that OA will become more widespread.

Why Open Access Journals?

The main aim of using the OA journals is to narrow down the gap between breakthroughs in the sciences and their distribution. The OA model is deliberated to take advantage of the speed and impact of scientific communication that is now possible with the existence of Internet technology. Advancements in technology have increased the extensive and speedy dissemination of publications. Another aim
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of using OA journals is to promote quality research. These two aims can be achieved through the OA model.

OA journals also overcome the issue of high pricing of access to articles in the traditional, subscription-based publishing model (The Open Citation Project, 2004). OA gives readers copyright consent to republish or reuse content, provided the author and publisher be given appropriate acknowledgment.

**Publish or Perish**

Research publications have been made part of the criteria for promotion and the earning of tenure. The high chase of the Key Performance Index (KPI) of universities has produced over-worked academics who need to get research published to earn tenure and promotion. This has also paved the way for the emergence of thousands of spurious journals that publish papers speedily, perhaps even the day after receipt of a manuscript, for a fee without any peer review or copyediting. Recent developments suggest that the good intention of providing free access to scholarly research for everyone through OA may have paved a road to hell for some authors. Listed below are some cases to show that open-access journals have created a shadowy publishing landscape.

In 2008 Jeffrey Beall, an academic librarian and researcher at the University of Colorado in Denver, started noticing very frequent spam e-mails appearing in his inbox. These spam emails were specifically from new scholarly journals, soliciting him to join their editorial boards or to submit articles. Beall became fascinated because most of the e-mails contained several grammatical errors; that got him browsing through the journals’ websites, and he soon realised that many of the journals and their publishers were not quite what they claimed to be although the names sounded ‘big’ with words like “global” and “international” frequently being used in them. These websites looked as if they were created by non-professionals and they also gave hardly any information about...
the organisations behind the scene. This prompted Beall to record and analyse on his blog any probable voracious scholarly open-access publishers. Beall claimed that the goal of predatory open-access publishers is to exploit this model by charging fees without giving the standard publishing services of peer review, editing and website maintenance. Beall also described this as a plan to deceive authors and readers as well. Beall’s conclusion was that these publishers lacked transparency in their operation and process of running their Open Access Journals. Beall (2012) found that there were journals that accepted almost every article, as long as the authors paid the fees. The individual authors were simply eager to publish their papers and were seen as customers; they were not libraries that needed to maintain quality, professionalism and credibility. Therefore, in OA publishing, a strong incentive to maintain quality is removed.

Fake publishers and journals often use very stylish titles that make them seem prestigious. This form of abuse records the highest occurrence in India, where new, rapacious publishers and journals emerge each week (Beall, 2012). This is due to there being thousands of scientists in India and its neighbouring regions, all seeking to get published to earn tenure and promotion. As a result, many scientists are taking unethical shortcuts that include publishing plagiarised work. This is also causing the traditional screening process for quality research to slowly vanish.

Problems that Arise

Caught in this unethical dilemma, it is the honest scientists who tend to lose out the most as unethical scientists who do not abide by the rules are earning tenure and promotion at the expense of legitimate ones.

The rivalry for author fees among greedy publishers is a serious threat to the future of science communication. To compete in a crowded market, genuine open-access publishers are pressured to offer shorter submission-to-publication times. This weakens the peer-review process, a time-consuming task if conducted well.

John Bohannon, in his article entitled “Who’s Afraid of Peer Review?” (2013), describes how a biologist received news that a paper submitted two months earlier
had been accepted to the Journal of Natural Pharmaceuticals, when in fact, the article should have been promptly rejected as it contained inconsistencies and faults. Johannon states in his article, “Any reviewer with more than high school knowledge of chemistry and the ability to understand a basic data plot should have spotted the paper’s shortcomings immediately.” The ‘author’ of the faulty paper, who was Johannon himself, writing under the false name, Ocorrafoo Cobange, had submitted 304 versions of the paper over 10 months to open-access journals. More than half of the journals had accepted the paper without realising it had serious flaws. The paper was even accepted by industry titans Sage and Elsevier as well as the prestigious Kobe University in Japan.

This proves that open-access scientific journals have mushroomed into a global industry, driven by author publication fees. Many journals now available claim to be peer reviewed journals aiming to communicate high quality research articles with editors and advisory board members who are professors and experts in the field from universities around the world.

However, the study also showed that some open-access journals that have been criticised for poor quality control actually provided the most rigorous peer review in this case. The flagship journal of the Public Library of Science, *PLOS ONE*, was the only journal that rejected and highlighted the paper’s ethical problems.

In another case, it was highlighted how an author who had been trying to publish her study submitted her paper to an open-access journal that she believed was free as the website did not mention any fees. However, upon acceptance, she was asked to pay a publication fee.

According to Beall, there were 59 predatory open-access publishers in March 2012, but three months later the figure had doubled, and the rate has continued to far outperform DOAJ’S growth. Beall’s finding showed that one in five of Beall’s “predatory” publishers had managed to get at least one of their journals into the DOAJ.

In another study referred to in “Who’s Afraid of Peer Review?”, Bohannon looked at papers submitted at a rate of about 10 per week between January and August 2013 to
journals that matched the paper’s subject. Publishers that required a fee upfront were struck off the target list, leaving only the standard open-access ‘gold model’, through which authors pay a fee if the paper is published. Some journals rejected the papers. There were journals which only asked for changes in format, which were complied with, and then resubmission was done. In the case of serious scientific problems addressed by a review, a superficially “revised” version was sent without changing any of the critical issues addressed. Any accepted papers were withdrawn through a standard email sent to the editor. Table 1 provides the statistics.

Of a total of 255 papers (accepted and rejected), 60% of the decisions showed no sign of peer review. In the case of the rejected papers, the journals in question are probably of high quality as the papers were rejected by the editor who examined it instead of sending it for reviewing. As for the accepted papers, it is clear that no one actually read the material.

A total of 106 journals performed a review; of this number, 70% accepted the papers. The focus of the majority of the reviewers was basically on the formatting and language as well as the layout. Only 36 of the 304 submissions had review comments that were about the paper’s scientific problems, and 16 of those papers were accepted by the editors despite the derogatory reviews. Eighty-two per cent of the publishers who completed the review

Table 1: Papers Submitted to Journals (Jan – Aug, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accepted papers</td>
<td>157 Journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejected Papers</td>
<td>98 Journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abandoned websites</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to say under Review</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time taken for acceptance of a mss</td>
<td>40 days (average)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time taken for rejection of a mss</td>
<td>24 days</td>
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A FLAWED SYSTEM FOR JUDGING RESEARCH LEADING TO ACADEMIC FRAUD.
process accepted the paper. However, 45% of the DOAJ publishers that completed the review process accepted the bogus paper.

The number of predatory publishers and predatory journals has continued to escalate at a rapid pace (Beall, 2013). Frequent publication is one of few methods at scholars’ disposal to demonstrate academic talent. Successful publications bring attention to scholars and their sponsoring institutions, which can facilitate continued funding and an individual’s progress through their field. When the issue of predatory journals and producing publications for young academics was discussed with Nayan Deep S. Kanwal, the Chief Executive Editor of a journal based in the developing world, he was of the view that academics are under continual pressure to publish in order to demonstrate academic talent. Academics who publish in journals are compensated with financial benefits attached to promotion. This pressure to

Nayan Kanwal: Authors are “under continual pressure to increase output, potentially at the expense of quality.”
publish is a cause of low-quality work being submitted to academic journals. “In today’s world that is driven by the Internet, a researcher must know how to distinguish between good and bad publishers. They must know what is constituted as acceptable practice,” said Nayan Kanwal.

Nayan Kanwal further commented that the culture of publishing must not be developed at the expense of quality publications. Increasing the number of publications to secure promotion should not be the practice. Articles should be written with the intention of sharing knowledge with other academics. This means that researchers and scholars should only submit an article which is correct factually and ethically. If this is the practice, then even if the publishers are fake, at least the facts reported are reliable and not totally out of context!”

Conclusion

The core issue is one of oversight and the impact this may have on the dissemination of accurate information to the scientific community. It is the job of the editor to read every paper with scrutiny. The number of people influenced by incorrect or inaccurate data that are overlooked can be huge. Hence, there has to be a central publishing ethics board or council to conduct an investigation into these journals. Journals that charge submission fees should also be included in this investigation. The source of the problem with the gold open-access model is the article-processing charges (Beall, 2013). Indeed, it is becoming less important where good ideas that work are published, and it is getting easier to construe what is important to one’s research needs.

References


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