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There is no black and white definition of predatory publishing

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*The nature and extent of predatory publishing is highly contested. Whilst debates have often focused defining journals and publishers as either predatory or not predatory. **Kyle Siler** argues that predatory publishing encompasses a spectrum of activities and that by understanding this ambiguity, we can better understand and make value judgements over where legitimacy lies in scholarly communication.*

Predatory publishing has emerged as a professional problem for academics and their institutions, as well as a broader **societal concern**. As these journals have proliferated, they have brought to the fore a debate over what constitutes legitimate science, which has been centred on attempts to **define and demarcate predatory** from non-predatory publications. However, given the complexity of academic publishing – and what constitutes

legitimacy – establishing a concrete definition has proved challenging. There is considerable diversity in the types, combinations and degrees of illegitimacy in questionable academic journals, which ultimately raises the question: is it possible to define predatory publishing in such a binary way?

Predatory publishing bug or feature?

A key feature of many open access business models is the Article Processing Charge (APC). Whereby, publishers instead of receiving flat subscription fees, are remunerated for each published article. This provides a 'predatory' incentive for less scrupulous publishers to publish articles quickly and without appropriate quality control, as, after all, rejected articles consume publisher resources but yield no revenue.



high fees in eminent journals may be criticised, but they would never be labelled as 'predatory', even if their business models may be economically exploitative.



This 'predatory' incentive structure is also uniquely ascribed to low and middle-status OA journals. In contrast, prestigious OA publishers and journals enjoy the benefit of having selectivity positively associated with value. High rejection rates, if not always quality, imbue prestigious journals and publishers with pricing power. As such, high fees in eminent journals may be criticised, but they would never be labelled as 'predatory', even if their business models may be economically exploitative.

That definitions of predatory publishing have a subjective element is made clear by observing that economic exploitation can also exist in other business models. For example, the “big deal” subscriptions that lock universities into paying for journals that are **seldom used**. Analogous concepts of **predatory pricing** and **predatory lending** entail judgments of unethical and/or socially harmful economic behaviours. However, perceptions of ethical economic behaviour are subjective and context-dependent. Thus, defining predatory publishing can not only be based on *empirical* observations of publishing behaviours and outputs, but also perspectives regarding ideal academic norms and values. Given the wide variety of individual and institutional values in academia, it is unsurprising that there have been **fierce debates** and **political maneuvering** regarding predatory publishing.

Defining predatory publishing

To illustrate this point, I analysed 11,450 journals on the Cabells Journal Blacklist to assess the varying degrees of predatory activity undertaken by different journals, from examples of obvious illegitimacy with numerous severe violations of academic norms, such as fraudulently claiming editors and impact factors, to more moderate or minor violations, such as sloppy copyediting and poorly maintained webpages. As Fig.1 shows, there is a wide continuum of niches of journals and publishers on the Cabells blacklist displaying varying degrees of predatory practices.

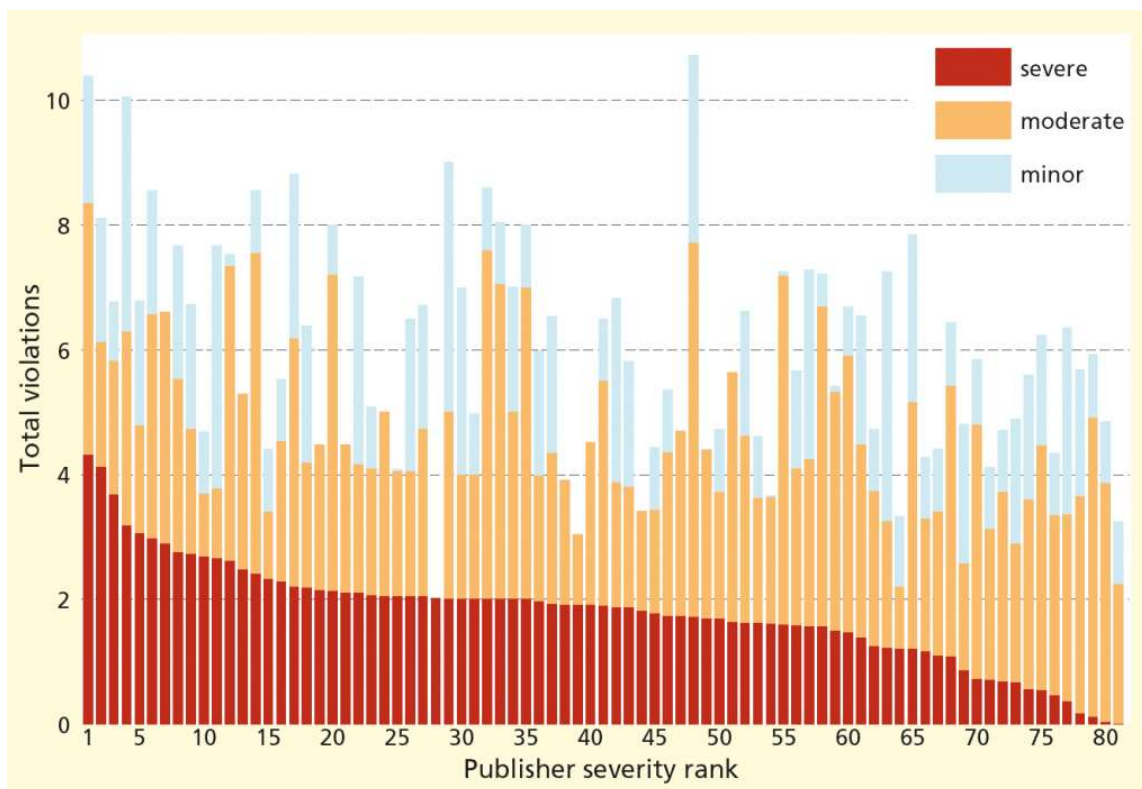


Fig 1 Average Cabells Blacklist Journal Violations (publishers with at least 20 blacklisted journals)

This raises the question of where and how academic and professional gatekeepers should draw the line between legitimate and predatory along this wide continuum of predation. Further complicating matters is that there are different types and combinations of predation. Fig 2 illustrates a co-occurrence network of violations on the Cabells blacklist, showing a wide variety of combinations of violations in modern academic publishing. Due to the variety and complexity in the degrees and types of predatory publishing, this makes empirically and normatively drawing lines between legitimate and illegitimate publishing a significant challenge.

criticism and controversy over business practices, particularly regarding excessively permissive peer review and subordination of academic functions to business interests (e.g., [this](#), [this](#), [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)).

Managing Ambiguity

Academic publishing is simultaneously a professional and an economic activity; legitimacy is bolstered by reaching an appropriate balance between these two often competing ideals. In order for academic publishing to be perceived as legitimate, academic functions cannot be superseded by economic interests. Since in APC-based publishing, selectivity and quality control are costly, many lower-status publishers are vulnerable to the stigma of predation.

The role played by peer review is key to this issue. Despite being essential to the quality of a journal, peer review is often an opaque activity, with the journal brand acting as a **signal of quality and trustworthiness**. Complicating matters, some predatory journals appear to conduct **some sort of peer review**, while others do not. There is also confusion around the different standards of peer review applied by large-scale open access publishers. One means solving this issue would be the wider application of **open peer review** as a way of demonstrating the quality of peer review and exposing poor practice.

Both scholars and publishers have strong interests in definitions of predatory publishing. For scholars and their institutions, such definitions bestow intellectual legitimacy and professional credit for hiring, tenure and promotion. Meanwhile, both established and upstart publishers compete for market share in the multi-billion dollar industry of academic publishing. There is considerable diversity in individual and institutional values in academia. Likewise, predatory and quasi-predatory publishers exhibit a complex variety of often idiosyncratic niches. Thus, it is no surprise the debates around predatory publishing are often contentious. However, when academic institutions do not adequately address the issue of predatory publishing, there can be **ugly consequences**. Evaluating obvious black-and-

white cases of predatory publishing (for instance [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) is relatively simple. How academics, librarians and their institutions handle the multiple shades of grey – and where they draw economic and professional lines between legitimate and illegitimate – in modern publishing will be a much larger and more profound challenge.

This post draws on the author's article, [Demarcating spectrums of predatory publishing: Economic and institutional sources of academic legitimacy](#), published in JASIST an un-paywalled version of the post is available [here](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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Kyle Siler is a Research Professor at the Université de Montréal where he is Principal Investigator on a multi-year research project on status and legitimacy in publishing, funded by the Sloan Foundation. Kyle received his PhD from the Cornell University Department of Sociology.

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