

Without stronger ethical standards, predatory publishing will continue to be a permanent feature of scholarly communication

Predatory publishing has been the subject of much heated debate and conjecture. Panagiotis Tsigaris and Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva, argue that predatory publishing still remains under-scrutinized, enigmatic and in need of effective collective solutions. Without clearer and stronger ethical standards in scholarly publishing, they argue that responses to predatory publishing will continue to be uncoordinated and ultimately unsuccessful.

The multi-billion dollar for-profit publishing [industry](#) is concentrated in the hands of a few publishers who have market power resulting in an [inefficient](#) and expensive market system. Thousands of traditionally peer reviewed journals that claim to follow ethical guidelines to maintain the integrity of their scholarly and scientific record have succumbed to the “game”, in which indexing and [metrics](#), such as the journal impact factor, CiteScore or Altmetrics, are played for [prestige](#), and serve as branding tools to attract new clients (authors and their funders).

The academic publishing industry exists to help find a home for valid research, but it also finds itself dealing with the massive market of millions of rejected papers. As a consequence, many academics turn to a pay-to-publish scheme, or publish their work in weak scholarly venues. Awareness of the issue of “predatory” journals or publishers, which evolved in a rapidly expanding publishing market of research activity and [disruptive technology](#), was raised by Jeffrey Beall, via his blog and two [blacklists](#), one for stand-alone open access (OA) journals and another for OA publishers. However, [opacity](#) related to listing criteria, [false entries](#), apparent [discrimination](#), [lack of information literacy](#), the exclusive targeting of the OA movement, as well as legal threats, all eventually led to the demise of that blog by [Beall himself](#).

[Blacklists and whitelists](#) are fallible and risky because they carry [false positives](#), i.e., for blacklists some entries might have been correctly judged as “predatory”, but others might not have. Possibly unaware of the [risks of error](#) in such lists, risk-averse scholars may have avoided valid small start-up OA publishers due to the blacklisting stigma. Some perfectly legitimate OA publishers may have closed as a result. Despite these [false entries](#), hundreds of papers have appeared in academic journals warning academics of the threats of “predatory” publishing. However, scholars are still unable to clearly define what “[predatory](#)” is. This uncertainty has produced unintended consequences: [unsubstantiated accusations](#), [mass profiling](#), [hype and spin](#), [wild estimates](#) of the “predatory” publishing market, or using [questionable research](#) in order to make [questionable claims](#) of rewards for publishing in “predatory” journals. Risks of the “predatory” label have thus not been efficiently assessed and proposed responses have, as a result, been limited. Meanwhile, the public [loses trust in science](#).

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To try and weed out “predatory” journal or publishers, or to expose unscholarly practices, some have reverted to unethical [stings](#). The [Bohannon sting](#) employed fake names, affiliations and emails to try and trick hundreds of OA journals. As one consequence, the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) [cleaned up](#). Rather than rooting out unscholarly actions, such stings fortify publishing’s [fake elements](#) through the use of fake identities, the [legality](#) of which is not being sufficiently questioned. More recently, another similar [stunt](#) was conducted, but the authors [violated](#) submission guidelines and wasted editors’ time, only to find that a few journals accepted a duplicated publication amongst OA, subscription and so-called predatory journals. It is difficult to crackdown on predatory journals or publishers because their deceptive nature is unclear, and some are difficult to differentiate from [low-quality](#) scholarly journals. One way to deal with this issue is by lawsuits, but this option is time consuming, expensive, difficult to implement transnationally, and evidence must be crystal clear, a high-profile exception being [OMICS](#).



The most effective way to deal with “predatory” publishing is still through education and awareness. Librarians and colleagues can assist early career researchers in [finding](#) appropriate research outlets. Ultimately, the choice of publishing venue lies with scholars, who need to select carefully where they submit their papers. Submitting papers in response to [unsolicited spam emails](#), publishing in journals that automatically accept a paper, hiding the existence of article processing charges, possible fake editors, or excessive volumes of problematic papers are all red flags that such venues may have as a goal to make a quick profit, and are thus best avoided. The “predatory” issue is [not limited to OA](#).

Robust [post-publication peer review](#), coupled with strict adherence to stated ethical principles (e.g., COPE, ICMJE) by journals, could effectively weed out erroneous literature and misconduct in scholarly publishing, but those guidelines need independent [arbitration](#), and reward schemes for such players, such as at [Publons](#), must be carefully controlled. A stronger sense of academic community is needed with a collective enterprise of values that ejects editors who fail to correct the record or fail to abide by their own stated ethical norms, who [hide conflicts](#) of interest, or engage in “[ethical exceptionalism](#)” by claiming one set of ethical values without following their own advice.

Hunting down “predatory” journals or publishers, without knowing precisely who they are, and their precise scholarly violations, is meaningless if seen in isolation because core problems also exist within the status quo

To deal with this crisis of legitimacy requires will-power by those who have established ethics codes and guidelines (COPE, ICMJE) to ensure that their members – not just [authors](#) – firmly implement the rules, and penalize them if they are guilty of violations. The broken scholarly record needs [all of its errors](#) repaired. Publishers, who have reaped benefits and profits from copyright and intellect, should reassess their entire journal portfolios to confirm their integrity, but this might result in a flood of corrections, expressions of concern and retractions, all of which need to be [destigmatized](#). Especially when research involves public health risks, as with COVID-19 explorations, [stringency measures](#) are needed by journal editors to detect errors and questionable research instead of a speedy review. Journals should also have [open data policies](#) to allow for verifications, replications and extensions. Ultimately, actions like [suing OMICS](#) have simply treated the symptoms of predatory publishing, rather than its underlying causes.

Hunting down “predatory” journals or publishers, without knowing precisely who they are, and their precise scholarly violations, is meaningless if seen in isolation because core problems also exist within the status quo, including [questionable links](#), [hidden editorial conflicts of interest](#), and [publication bias](#). The publishing industry has a chance to pivot towards full transparency, but only time will tell if any improvements are made. While greater awareness of the concerns raised herein can be made by the media or external pressure applied by some groups and the public (e.g., Retraction Watch, PubPeer, bloggers, etc.), novel solutions need to be created by academics – early career researchers and established researchers alike – in close interaction with [editors](#), publishers, academic and [scientific societies](#), and policy groups.

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