

Editorial

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Predatory publishers: a bait for novices and expert researchers alike

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A few days ago, one of our colleagues, a middle-aged scholar, came to our office proudly remarking that she had written her first book chapter. Since we had recently heard about predators in scientific literature, we asked her whether she was sure her publisher was for real, wherein she replied without blinking: "Of course, the book is published online, I can see it anytime." And she showed us the website...

Ethical issues on publications were, until recently, mostly concerning authors' misconduct (i.e., plagiarism, major overlap/redundancy, minor overlap/"salami publishing," fabricated data, ghost authorship, undisclosed conflicts of interest). With the purpose of actively encouraging intellectual honesty, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) was founded in 1997, providing guidelines to be followed by authors, editors, reviewers and editorial board members. As a consequence, authors' misconduct may persist, albeit in a more controlled way within the academic community [1]. However, the emergence of open access literature brought with it a developing area of concern on publication ethics.

Open access literature

Open access scientific literature refers to online journals available to everybody for free, with, in most of cases, no restrictions regarding copyright and licencing, which can be read, downloaded and freely used for any purposes. The fact of being free for readers has made acceptable that there may be publication charges payed by the authors [2]. Until 2000, scholarly communication was available to scientists mostly through print-only subscriptions payed by their institutions, but in the early 2000s, publishing models began to flip to online [3]. The history around the emergence of a new author-pays model of literature is better understood when considering that the former print-only model implied that researchers carried out peer review for free, yet the publishing companies charged billions of

dollars a year for the same persons and their institutions to read the articles [4].

During 2008, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) mandated free public access to the published results of any NIH funded investigation, and the US Congress made mandatory that the electronic manuscripts should be submitted to PubMed Central by researchers when they had been publicly funded [5]. Two years later, Public Library of Science (PLOS) became profitable and one of their journals, PLOS ONE, became the world's largest scientific publisher [6]. Nevertheless, digitization involved higher costs, due to format changes and the need to fund new and different investments [3]. Paradoxically, instead of libraries or institutions, authors became the customers, not for reading, but for publishing the articles [2],[3].

The nature of a predator

Researchers and scholars are under pressure to publish because of many reasons: e.g., tenures, the personal pleasure of sharing their work or seeing their names in an article, wanting the research to influence healthcare practice and/or policy, the institutional requirement for academic productivity, another line in their *curriculum vitae*, making a meaningful contribution to science/knowledge/understanding, etcetera [7]. That "vulnerability" has not been ignored by hackers and profiteers that actively spam researchers with flattering messages while soliciting manuscripts under the promise of expedite review and quick publication [8]. The problem with those publishers is that the peer review process is usually fake, acceptance is the rule, and quality control does not exist. Researchers from developing countries are easy prey for these predators, since they are under the same pressure to publish as more developed countries, but with less guidance, support and mentorship [9]. Most institutions in developing countries often require that scholars and academics publish their research for

promotion or in order to maintain institutional prestige, get government funding and contribute to institutional ranking. Since most regulations were established a long time ago, they sometimes only lay down the need to publish in journals with an editorial board. That condition makes scientists a fertile breeding ground when they are called on to send manuscripts by editors or publishers.

Predators' modus operandi usually begins with an insistent spamming to scientists and scholars, soliciting manuscripts using the attractive bait of an expedite publishing. They usually do not mention that an author's fee is going to be charged [10]. After acceptance, authors are invoiced for fees ranging from US\$1,500 to US\$3,000. When authors complain about the high fee, the predator usually insists, offering a new price (up to 50 or 75 percent discount), since they need to show real papers exhibited at their websites. Thus, this "captured" evidence can confound unwary visitors. If the author does not agree to pay the new reduced fee and asks for retraction, the withdrawal of the paper is usually much more expensive or almost impossible [10]. Another common practice is to recruit prestigious scholars to serve on editorial boards, which some naïvely accept, while others are listed as editorial board members without their consent or permission, maybe even without their knowledge [3],[8],[11],[12].

These publishers usually own a fleet of journals, often with a scope that is incompatible with the title of the journal and the published editions. Their national base is not clear, usually with mailing addresses in US, Canada, Australia or Europe, while actually operating from other countries. When the address is searched using any online map, the location matches a freeway, a gas station or even a crop field. Domain name registrations are blinded as well, so it becomes impossible to identify owners and hackers in charge.

The problem

This is not only a matter of concern because of fraud. The big issue is the threat that predatory practices pose to the integrity and rigor of the whole peer review system. Considering that most research funding goes to biomedical research, it is in this field where predators are most active and the stakes are higher. Society and media pay great attention to scientific research, and public policy also rely on knowledge generated by published results, assuming medical research as honest and free from conflicts of interest. Moreover, translating this type of corrupt evidence into clinical medical practice is one of day-to-day activities predatory publishers most threaten [12]. Given that preyed articles are freely available, lay people lacking scientific training have no way to notice the difference between the authentic science from the fake [13].

Effective communication constitutes the basis of human relations, and, in the field of academy, it involves the need that information must go beyond the mere fact of disseminating investigation results. In this line, open access editors promote democratization of information, which encourages free knowledge, but implies economical costs for authors. Therefore, economic interests have led to

the emergence of predatory publishers, which are a growing menace for good practices in investigation, by appearing as a quick and tempting chance to foster academic advancement, but directly threatening, at the same time, the core reason of knowledge generation.

When we insisted to know the name of the publisher of our colleague's book, she replied that her publication fee had been voided, so it could not be a predator. Our colleague is a very smart person and her output was a very well-written book chapter. Finally, when reviewing the Open Access Directory and locating the address on Google Maps, it was effectively a predatory publisher. Her book will be on their website forever, with no indexing, intended to work as a bait for other naïve authors who may visit the site. Our colleague's options now are either to insist on withdrawing, or to write off the chance of having her work properly recognized, while the predator will continue to profit on what was a very good book chapter.

Notes

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest with the subject of this editorial.

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