

Predatory Journals – Menace to the Real Science and Academic Publishing

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Academic publications and scientific communications in peer reviewed journals form the basis of academic progress and the accumulation of scientific knowledge upon which further developments are pursued. There has been an escalating trend in the volume of academic work published in recent years with a proliferation of scientific journals. This is partly due to rapid developments across various domains of science over the last decades; however, publications are increasingly recognized as a benchmark to ascertain career progression of academic scholars. The quantity of scientific publications is weighed heavily during recruitment, tenure offers, and career promotions, thus driving publication rates in this era of ‘publish or perish.’

While publications have traditionally been a feature of subscriptionbased scientific journals offering access to fee-paying readership, the emergence of the open access (OA) model in the early 2000s changed the paradigm of scientific communication by offering a faster and more efficient process to disseminate academic work online, permitting accessibility to a wider audience with little or no charge. Such a model has increased the volume of published work as it shortens the time to process, peer review, accept, and digitally publish manuscripts, which then become immediately available for perusal.¹ These advantages are particularly attractive to emerging researchers focused on rapidly building publication portfolios to advance careers and secure research funding.

Since open access journals operate independently of subscription income, authors pay an article processing charge (APC) upon manuscript acceptance. APCs cover manuscript handling, peer review, editing, publication, indexation, and archiving. All these components are

crucial to maintaining the integrity and legitimacy of published scientific work.

However, much to the dismay of the scientific community, fraudulent publishers have exploited the OA model by operating substandard, lowquality, and even fake journals purely for financial gain. The APC model is manipulated to extract money from unsuspecting researchers under the claim of publishing in indexed scientific journals. The deception involves aggressive email invitations promising rapid peer review and near guaranteed publication. Such journals often use prestigious sounding titles and mimic the formatting and layout of reputable publishers to mislead authors. Falsified impact factors are claimed, and there is usually little to no legitimate peer review or credible editorial oversight.

Recent global estimates highlight the scale of this problem. Cabells’ Predatory Reports database lists over 20,000 deceptive or predatory journals worldwide.² Earlier bibliometric analyses also documented a rapid rise in predatory journal output over the past decade.³ Despite ongoing debate regarding precise definitions, predatory journals have been described as outlets that “lack adherence to best practices, are deceptive, or actively solicit manuscripts while failing to provide robust peer review.”⁴ Jeffrey Beall, an academic librarian at the University of Colorado, first brought systematic attention to this menace and coined the term ‘predatory’ to describe such journals that prey upon researchers solely for monetary gain without

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regard for scholarly standards. He also compiled a comprehensive list of questionable publishers. The magnitude of the issue prompted organizations such as the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) and the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) to issue formal guidance to help authors recognize and avoid predatory publishers.^{5,6}

The presence of such dishonest publishers poses a serious threat to the integrity, reliability, and trustworthiness of evidencebased science. In the absence of rigorous peer review, substandard or misleading research can enter the scientific record, potentially undermining clinical decisionmaking and public health policy.⁷ Conversely, meaningful research may lose visibility if published in nonindexed predatory journals, limiting its academic impact. Publication in such outlets may also discredit promising researchers and hinder future academic progression.

It is, therefore, paramount that deceitful and exploitative practices in academic publishing be highlighted and that all stakeholders engage in efforts to mitigate this threat. Institutions funding research should discourage publication in, as well as citation of predatory journals. In the context of Pakistan and the wider South Asian region where academic promotion criteria and postgraduate requirements increasingly emphasize publication output, it is essential that quality is not sacrificed for numerical targets. Regulatory and accrediting bodies must reinforce policies that prioritize indexed, peer reviewed, and ethically governed journals while discouraging publication in deceptive outlets.^{8,9}

Journals should review adherence to Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) standards and COPE principles of transparency and best practice, while actively raising awareness of predatory publishing. Academic institutions and teaching faculties should arrange periodic workshops for emerging researchers, providing guidance on assessing journal credibility through recognized indexing databases, authentic metrics, and verification of ISSN registration, as well

as identifying warning signs using criteria from world association of medical journals (WAME), COPE, DOAJ, and ICMJE. These organizations have jointly developed the “Think. Check. Submit.” checklist, a freely available and user friendly tool to assist authors in identifying trusted journals.¹⁰

Only through sustained and coordinated efforts, particularly within developing research ecosystems striving for global visibility, can we curb academic deception and preserve the integrity and prestige of high quality scholarly publishing, which remains fundamental to scientific progress and the maintenance of public trust in medical research.

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