**Predatory publishing from the Global South perspective**

Reggie Raju, Lena Nyahodza, and Jill Claassen

**Abstract**

The publication of research outputs, in the main, has a social justice aim that is enacted by the desire of researchers to share their research findings for the betterment of society. There is a strong belief in the necessity of a symbiotic relationship between reader and researcher. This relationship is supported by the view that access to published knowledge is essential for the production of new knowledge, and new research builds on previous knowledge, establishing its validity through collective scrutiny. Traditionally, research has been made public through journals, meeting proceedings, and books produced largely by commercial publishers, and access to this research has had to be bought. Despite the hope for a more symbiotic relationship, many accept that certain research findings will solicit greater interest than others. One can quite comfortably assume that if certain research publications are not 'relevant' to the potential reader, then they will not solicit too much interest. The responsibility lies with the thinking reader to analyse the research outputs to determine their relevancy and influence, whether it is for education, adaptation, or praxis. This admirable process of sharing information for the betterment of society has been hijacked by commercial publishers who have taken the research content and, with the aid of pro bono reviewing on the part of faculty researchers, have placed a levy upon the distribution of scholarly intellectual work of the researchers. The prohibitive costs levied for access to this research have drastically limited dissemination of this same research. Researchers have responded to this limitation by advocating for more transformative publishing models that would be focused on driving open access as opposed to profit

margins. In the case of journals, instead of limiting access to those who are able to purchase subscriptions, some researchers are insisting that scholarly articles must be freely accessible to anyone who has access to the internet, emphasising the social justice aspect of research disseminstion.

Clearly, researchers' desire to share findings has been made vulnerable to exploitation by commercial publishers who not only levy exorbitant dissemination charges, but also coerce researchers to cede copyright in exchange for improved visibility of their work. Then there are those unethical publishers who engage in unsavoury publishing processes making 'unearned' profits through deceptive processes, for example, the promise of vigorous peer review process, however, the evential publication of the submission devoid of such a process. The whole publishing landscape has been turned on its head and has now become a tool for large profits as well as personal and institutional prestige.

The crux of this paper is to engage a discourse on the issue of what the librarian Jeffrey Beall termed 'predatory publishing'.[1] This unilateral determination of predatory publishing sent the research publishing world into a tizzy. Even though Beall has withdrawn his list from the internet, thanks to web-crawling rechnology, his list is not cleared from the web archive, nor can anyone prevent the analysis of the list by anyone who wants to parse it. Nor, has there been subsequently an adequate reconceptualization of predatory publishing to ensure that it is not discriminatory to open access (OA) or the Global South.

---

[1] Although Beall has since taken down his website, *Scholarly Open Access*, where he posted and regularly updated his list of "predatory" open-access publishers, the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine has captured and archived various time-stamped versions of it: https://web.archive.org/web/20160422160248/https://scholarlyoa.com/publishers/.

**The conundrum**

In an article in the *Journal of Korean Medical Science,* which levies processing charges to support “worldwide…free online access”, Beall shares the core components in his definition of ‘predatory publishing’. The first component is the exploitation of the gold open-access model to earn profits from scholarly publishing in a dishonest way. Beall alleges that publishers are reneging on their commitment to deliver on a rigorous peer review process. Beall (2106: 2) goes on to posit that predatory publishers are “typically do[ing] everything they can to trick authors into submitting papers in order to get the author fees from them”. “In gold open access, the publishing costs are covered by fees charged to the authors upon acceptance of their manuscripts for publication,…the published articles are free for anyone to access” (Beall 2016: 2). Inherent in this component of the definition is the levying of article processing charges (APCs). The second component is the lack of a rigorous peer review process. The third is the existence of “low-quality or predatory journals that exist…on the Internet” (Beall 2016: 1511). The fourth component is the medium of dissemination of the research—that is, the internet.

What we find intriguing is the fact that Beall has published his definition of predatory publishing in a journal from the Global South that levies processing charges to ensure wider open accessibility. Bell (2017) posits that the concept of the ‘predatory’ publisher has become a standard way of characterising a new breed of open access journals that, for some, appear to be more concerned with making a profit than disseminating academic knowledge. She goes on to point out that Beall used the term “predatory” to describe journals that exists exclusively to make a profit from charging publication fees (Bell 2017: 652). This raises the question: which commercial publisher is *not* driven by profit?  Anderson

(2015) brings to the debate a critical focus on the second core criteria used by Beall in defining predatory publishing—that is, the “non conformity of good publishing practices.” Anderson argues that it is a pity that Beall only got this realization after open access started to gain momentum. Are poor publishing practises, for example, really a new phenomenon? The third body blow is the medium of dissemination: in the current technological age there is no clearing of the web archive. Does one individual have the right to condemn a journal to “junk status” and what are the implications of this condemnation when, although opinions may be revised later (or even silently withdrawn), the original opinion remains “live” on the internet?

It is unfortunate, but the reality is that the internet has become the most significant medium for the dissemination of information. We would argue strongly that castigating the internet as a medium for sharing research findings is nonsensical despite the fact that it brings with it major challenges. As the pace of change accelerates, so do the risks associated with that change.

Despite all of the challenges that the internet brings, it has become a way of life for those in the Global North and is fast becoming the norm for those in the Global South. There is broad acknowledgement (albeit with maybe no acceptance) that there is:

- illegal or inappropriate materials on the internet;
- illegal downloading of music and other copyrighted material for free;
- addiction to online social networks leading to the disruption of living standards and professional activity;
- the use of the internet in spreading computer viruses and even intercepting credit card or bank details for spurious purposes; and
- an exponential increase in cybercrime.

The internet has also aided and abetted the spread of fake news, which has become a major bane for the political process of democracy and watchdog journalism around the world. As the overall media landscape changes, there are ominous developments that will always challenge openness and democracy. In order to maintain an open and democratic society, it is imperative that government, business, and consumers work together to solve the problem of fake news. Everyone has a responsibility to combat the scourge of fake news and disinformation, ranging from the promotion of strong standards and best practices for professional journalism, public and government support for long-form investigative journalism, and the reduction and elimination of financial incentives for fake news. Despite the American President granting an award for the most corrupt and biased reporting (Flegenheimer and Grynbaum 2018), governments should promote news literacy and strong professional journalism. The news industry must provide high-quality journalism in order to build public trust and correct fake news and disinformation without re-legitimizing them.

Like fake news, there has to be a holistic strategy to combat unethical publishing practises. Fake journals pose a number of ethical issues as well as conundrums for authors and academic institutions who must decide how to deal with content submitted to and/or published in them. Everyone (not just Beall)—authors, institutions, editors, and publishers—has a responsibility to support the legitimate scholarly research enterprise, and to avoid supporting fake journals by not publishing in them, serving as their editors or on the Editorial Boards, nor permitting faculty to knowingly publish in them without consequences. Institutions need to refrain from raising unrealistic promotion expectations that drive authors into making unwise decisions. Only by addressing the underlying reasons for the continued presence of fake journals can this challenge to the scholarly research enterprise be solved. The end does not justify the means.

**Low-quality publishing**

In his enthusiasm to denounce content from publishers committed to unethical practises who also happened to be primarily located in the Global South, Beall defined predatory publishing loosely and rather "unacademically." We would advance that unethical publishing is not the same as "low quality" publishing; in fact, there are significant differences between predatory and "low quality." The interchangeable use of these terms is a clear indication of a poorly defined concept. In Beall's ill-defined concept, predatory publishers, range from well-meaning but clueless start-ups to amateurs, from those that are somewhat deceptive to those that are downright fraudulent publishers engaging in criminal behaviour. In this predatory landscape sketched out by Beall, Kravjar and Hladík (2016) point out that some publishers are predatory on purpose, while others may just be making mistakes due to neglect, mismanagement, or inexperience. Kravjar and Hladík (2016) hone in on open access (OA) as an important issue to re-examine, arguing that it is important to realize that open access alone does not equate to predatory. The authors add that good publishers can publish bad work and bad publishers can publish good work. Hence, the yardstick to measure "low quality" is not well defined and will be extremely difficult to objectively define.

What is missing, then, is a more precisely detailed contextualization for "predatory" or "low-quality" publishing. The issue of publishing quality predates OA and is not exclusive to OA journals. The bias in Beall's assertions is brought to the fore by Berger and Cirasella (2015: 133), who point out that "Beall favours toll-access publishers, specifically Elsevier, praising its 'consistent high quality.' However, a simple Google search for 'fake Elsevier journals' reveals Beall's position as [fragile]. Furthermore, Beall conflates OA journals with ‘author pays’ journals, and reveals his scepticism, if not hostility, about OA.” Kravjar and Hladík (2016) affirm this bias when they directly quote from Beall, where he states that, “while the open-access (OA) movement purports to be about making scholarly content open-access, its true motives are much different. The OA movement is an anti-corporatist movement that wants to deny the freedom of the press to companies it disagrees with.” We believe strongly that open access is *not* about denying freedom to corporations, but is rather about social justice: it is about sharing research for the betterment of society. It is, further, about collectively finding solutions to challenges that beset society. And, situated in Africa, we view open access as a means of converting Africa from a net consumer of the world’s knowledge production to a frequent contributor to the world’s knowledge production. As indicated above, access to scholarly content is critical to the production of new knowledge.

Beall tries to link quality to peer review. Another misconception is that peer review guarantees high quality, and the the converse is also proposed—that is, no peer review supposedly equals low quality, which thus is also equated with a publisher’s predatory status.

**Peer review**

Peer review is viewed as the gold standard for scholarly publishing. Abdul Azeez (2017) shares this assertion by pointing out that peer review is the cornerstone of a quality publication as the manuscript is thoroughly checked, and read by experts in the respective fields for academic and scientific quality. The authors support the contrary view that peer review is not as infallible as it is made out to be. Other scholars, such as Eve and Priego (2017, 765) advocate that peer review is deeply flawed.

It would seem that the single most important element in Beall's predatory publishing argument is the peer review process. The argument proposed is that it "guarantees" quality. However, the peer review process is shrouded in subjectivity. First, editors undertake the first level of review before making choices on reviewers. Much of the decision-making power rests in the hands of the editors, who are the link between the author and referee. Editors often stand accused of arbitrarily rejecting manuscripts before they reach peers. Secondly, the choice of reviewers is a very subjective process, with the editors determining who should review the manuscript. Thirdly, reviewers themselves are never totally objective, especially when there is a need to i*nterpret* research results. Fourthly, there is the accusation that North American reviewers see contributions by non-North Americans, especially content coming from the Global South, as weak and thus classified as not publishable. Shuttleworth (2009) corroborates this allegation, stating that there is evidence that decisions to publish or not to publish are often judged by country: a US-based journal is much more likely to reject non-US papers, whatever the quality.

As indicated, peer review is not the absolute gold standard in determining quality. The reliance on peer review to categorise, *carte blanche*, journals as predatory (or not) is negligent and destructive. For journals in the Global South that do not have a peer review process, it is doomed to be rated as junk, denying the world access to what may be excellent research.

**Publish or perish**

Drawing from the distinction that there is a difference between "low quality" journals and fake journals, or journals engaging in criminal activities, we would like to turn our attention to co-conspirators, be it the publishing system or authors. As posited by Baumann (2003, 14), there is significant pressure from institutions to align to the “publish or perish” system of institutional assessment. There are thus various institutional carrots and sticks that negatively influence some publishing outlets versus others. Where one publishes has serious implications for the evaluation of research careers, research departments, and funding for research projects; therefore, publication outputs are highly prioritised. Beasley (2005) adds that young academics are incentivised to churn out publications in their fledgling years.

And Kravjar and Hladík (2016) accurately sum up the negative impact of the “publish or perish” mantra, stating that, “together with market demand and supply in the absence of morals and ethics, [dictum to ‘publish or perish’] have a ‘carcinogenic’ effect and they infest and infect the scholarly community. The key to combatting them is through an appeal to ethics.” In this publish or perish landscape, the demand to publish (or else, and within a certain time-frame) is what really ensures that fake or fraudulent publishing thrive.

**The role of librarians: publishing literacy**

The last few years has witnesses the emergence of new literacies such as digital literacy and news literacy. In a climate where the Internet has triggered a degradation of trust, we propose developing a publishing literacy to counter the growth of fake publishing, and which would be commensurate with other literacies such as information and news literacies.

Authors need to become more literate in identifying tell-tale signs of journals that may not be totally kosher. Some of these signs include:

- continuous solicitations to submit to the journal;
- offer of unrealistically quick turnaround times from submission to publication; and
- manuscripts accepted “as is” with no reviewer comments.

Further, authors who knowingly publish in fake journals to augment their contribution to their disciplines are, in fact, cheating the system. This cheating harms authors who play by the rules and adhere to the higher standards of academic practice. Authors also need to know that, in terms of the law of delict (an intentional breach of a duty of care), knowingly publishing in fake journals is complicity in a crime and must accept co-liability in the degradation of trust and decline of science.

What must be advanced in publishing literacy is the importance of validation and credibility of research outputs. Researchers need to be able to identify journals that have a positive impact on the evaluation of their careers by their departments. They need to seek out journals that will aid in funding future research projects, and they need to become more aware of the fact that socio-economic impact is as important as citation impact and downloads.

**Conclusion**

The concept of “predatory” publishing turns out to be more complex than the definitions initially, and still, bandied about. However, there is minimal engagement with the concept from a Global South perspective. The generalization embodied in the definition and roll-out of the concept brings real grief to those in the Global South, and thus a Global South perspective is imperative for the purpose of educating the research community. The reconstruction of a more meaningfully precise definition would help research stakeholders to more effectively identify the journals in question and prevent their toxic effects on science. However, to fully support the well-intended philanthropic role of open access to scientific research, both authors and information practitioners should commit to support and cultivate the so called “low quality” journals to reach their full potential in “high quality” publishing, whilst continuing to investigate fake journals, for the purpose of educating other stakeholders. Related to this would be the introduction of a new publishing literacy that would make researchers more aware of the pitfalls of publishing in fake journals. More importantly, researchers need to accept co-liability in a criminal activity if they knowingly publish in fake journals as continued support for fake journals is, for all intents and purposes, a crime against the betterment of humanity through knowledge production and knowledge sharing.

Beall's unacademic definition of so-called "predatory" publishing needs to be dispelled and interventions like that of publishing literacy need to be sought and rolled out. Any intervention contemplated *must* not be prejudicial to the Global South or to open access as OA is critical to finding solutions to problems that beset Africa: OA is driven by a desire for social justice and social justice is the lifeblood for improved living conditions for Africans.

**References**

Azeez, Abdul E.P. 2017. "Academic Writing and Publishing in India: Is Quality a Touchstone?" *Journal of Community Positive Practices* 17, no. 1: 13–24.

Anderson, Rick. 2015. "Should We Retire the Term Predatory Publishing?" *The Scholarly Kitchen*, May 11. https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2015/05/11/should-we-retire-the-term-predatory-publishing/.

Baumann, Henrikke. 2003. "Publish or Perish? The Impact of Citation Indexing on the Development of New Fields of Environmental Research." *Journal of Industrial Ecology* 6, nos. 3-4: 13–26. https://doi.org/10.1162/108819802766269511.

Beall, Jeffrey. 2016. “Dangerous Predatory Publishers Threaten Medical Research.” *Journal of Korean Medical Science* 31, no. 10: 1511–13. https://doi.org/10.3346/jkms.2016.31.10.1511.

Beall, Jeffrey. 2016. “Essential Information about Predatory Publishers and Journals.” *International Higher Education* 86 (Summer): 2–3.

Beasley, Craig J. 2005. “Publish or Perish.” *The Leading Edge* (September): 805. http://doi.org/10.1190/tle24090872.1.

Bell, Kirsten. 2017. “Predatory Open Access Journals as Parody: Exposing the Limitations of ‘Legitimate’ Academic Publishing.” *TripleC* 15, no. 2: 651–62. https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v15i2.870.

Berger, Monica and Cirasella, Jill. 2015. “Beyond Beall’s List: Better Understanding Predatory Publishers.” *College and Research Libraries News* 76, no. 3: 132–5. https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.76.3.9277.

Eve, Martin and Priego, Ernesto. 2017. “Who is Actually Harmed by Predatory Publishers?” *TripleC* 15, no. 2: 755–70. https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v15i2.867.

Flegenheimer, Matt and Michael M. Grynbaum. 2018. “Trump Hands Out ‘Fake News Awards,’ Sans the Red Carpet.” *The New York Times*, January 17. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/business/media/fake-news-awards.html.

Kravjar, Julius and Marek Hladík. 2016. “The Ethical Hole at the Centre of ‘Publish or Perish’.” *University World News*, September 30. http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20160921112724448.

Shuttleworth, Martyn. 2009. “Disadvantages of Peer Reviews.” *Explorable*, September 12. https://explorable.com/disadvantages-of-peer-reviews.

Reggie Raju (reggie.raju@uct.ac.za) is the Deputy Director (Research & Learning) at the University of Cape Town Libraries. He holds a PhD in Information Studies and is the author of several publications in national and international journals, chapters in books and a book publication. He has participated in several national and international forums engaging the issue of research librarianship with a focus on openness in scholarly communications. He has currently serves as a member of the Academic and Research Libraries Standing Committee of IFLA, Fellow of the Library Publishing Coalition and the Chair of SPARC Africa. Reggie Raju is a member of the Editorial Management Team of the *South African journal of libraries and information science* in the capacity of Journal Manager.