

# The ugly phenomenon of predatory journals: what they are and how to avoid them

Eleonora Castellana 

The phenomenon of predatory scientific journals represents a growing problem in the academic and scientific world. As early as 2010, this issue was present and was widely described by Jeffrey Beall,<sup>1</sup> a librarian with expertise in scholarly communication. Through his work, Beall raised awareness by maintaining a list of potential predatory publishers and journals.<sup>2</sup>

Grudniewicz *et al*<sup>3</sup> define a predatory journal as follows: ‘Predatory journals and publishers are entities that prioritise self-interest at the expense of scholarship and are characterised by false or misleading information, deviation from best editorial and publication practices, a lack of transparency, and/or the use of aggressive and indiscriminate solicitation practices.’

These journals are marked by the absence of ethical and scientific standards, publishing articles without undergoing a rigorous peer review process. Predatory publishing can be simply understood as the active solicitation of articles in exchange for money without submitting them to legitimate peer review.<sup>4</sup> They are thus often motivated solely by profit rather than by contributing to the advancement of scientific knowledge.

Since researchers need to publish to maintain their status or advance in their academic careers and increase their h-index scores, the pressure to publish has grown exponentially. As in other sectors of society such as economics, the law of supply and demand applies here. The problem with scholarly journals is that the supply is so extensive that it becomes difficult to distinguish between journals that are worthy of attention and those that are best avoided.<sup>5</sup> Predatory journals exploit the ‘publish or perish’ culture, a motto that refers to the intense

pressure researchers face to continuously publish in high-impact journals to avoid disappearing from the academic scene.<sup>6</sup>

A predatory journal is primarily distinguished by:

- ▶ Lack of genuine peer review.<sup>7</sup> These journals accept scientific papers without a real peer review process or with superficial review. This means that articles with methodological errors, unverified data or unsupported conclusions can be published without proper scientific scrutiny, compromising the integrity of the published research.
- ▶ Exorbitant fees for guaranteed publication.<sup>7</sup> Predatory journals charge researchers publication fees (Article Processing Charges (APCs)). These developments have contributed to the rise of open access journals, where content is freely available to readers and the costs of publication are covered by authors. The open source nature of open access journals has made it easy for predatory journals to mimic legitimate ones and proliferate.<sup>8</sup> Often, APCs are excessively high.<sup>9</sup>
- ▶ Unrealistic promises of rapid publication. While reputable scientific journals require significant time for review and publication, predatory journals promise incredibly fast timelines, sometimes within days, to attract authors. Rapid acceptance often results in low-quality publications, including false papers.<sup>10</sup>
- ▶ Lack of transparency in platforms.<sup>9</sup> Predatory journals often fail to provide clear information about their editorial board, impact factor or editorial processes. In some cases they use fake or misleading names to give the appearance of legitimacy or authority in the field.
- ▶ Aggressive marketing practices.<sup>8 10</sup> Another common feature is the unsolicited emails sent to academics, urging them to submit their papers or join their editorial boards. This

behaviour is unusual for legitimate scientific journals.

The existence of these journals has negative consequences both for researchers and for the scientific community as a whole. Academics, especially early-career researchers or those from developing countries, may be misled by the deceptive practices of these journals.<sup>11</sup> Publishing in a predatory journal can compromise a researcher’s academic reputation and harm their future career prospects.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the presence of low-quality or unverified articles in the literature can hinder scientific progress. If other researchers rely on such studies to build their own research, they may base their work on incorrect data or flawed conclusions, leading to a domino effect of scientific errors.

In summary, the main reasons to avoid publishing in predatory journals are:<sup>12</sup>

- ▶ Predatory journals have a limited readership: articles risk being ignored.
  - ▶ Publishing in a predatory journal can damage a researcher’s professional reputation.
  - ▶ Predatory journal publishers may disappear suddenly, erasing all traces of your research.
  - ▶ Articles in predatory journals are effectively already published, giving other publishers the right to reject the submission of your work.
  - ▶ Predatory journals make no distinction between authentic research and fake work, harming academic research.
- Authors have several tools at their disposal to select the right publishing venue in an informed and careful manner based on evidence. These include:<sup>13</sup>
- ▶ Think Check & Submit:<sup>14</sup> A simple tool to assess the publisher and verify their editorial policies.
  - ▶ Think Check & Attend:<sup>15</sup> A tool to evaluate participation in conferences and invitations received.
  - ▶ Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ):<sup>16</sup> The best tool for testing the credibility of an open access journal, examining licences, types of peer review, costs and preservation policies.
  - ▶ Retraction Watch and Retraction Watch Database:<sup>17</sup> These allow detailed monitoring of retractions and help assess the quality of publication venues.

In addition to the tools mentioned above, Beall’s list<sup>18</sup> should always be consulted. Furthermore, always carefully examine the editorial board: if the editors are unknown or difficult to

Hospital Pharmacy, Azienda Ospedaliero Universitaria Citta della Salute e della Scienza di Torino, Torino, Piemonte, Italy

Correspondence to Dr Eleonora Castellana; [ecastellana@cittadellasalute.to.it](mailto:ecastellana@cittadellasalute.to.it)

contact, this is a warning sign. Be wary of journals that promise fast publication or demand high publication fees without providing transparent details about costs and services, and that actively solicit article submissions via repeated emails.

I am pleased to recall that recently even the *European Journal of Hospital Pharmacy (EJHP)* addressed this topic, alerting its readers to the existence of this phenomenon and urging them to exercise caution in choosing where to submit their work. Specifically, this warning was conveyed in the work of Professor Philip Wiffen<sup>19</sup> who described what happened to a research group he was involved with, which almost fell into the predatory trap. At the end of his article he encouraged researchers to continue publishing, but with caution: “So don’t stop publishing, but avoid the predators!” I believe this is the motto that best represents this phenomenon and can help pharmacists—and authors in general—avoid falling into the trap of these fraudulent journals, reminding us that this phenomenon poses a significant threat to the integrity of academic and scientific research.

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**ORCID iD**

Eleonora Castellana <http://orcid.org/0009-0006-9092-6588>

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