

COMMENTARY

Open Access Opaque Policy

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Academic proficiency is appraised by publications in peer reviewed journals, which give immense pleasure and pride to the researcher. Since the beginning of Philosophical Transactions in 1665, there is a massive expansion in the research journals and now approximately 28,000 active, peer reviewed journals collectively publishing more than 1.8 million articles per year.¹ However, authors need to decide between high quality ideal journals, those that not only publishes an article fast, but also improve the article quality before publication through peer review, picks only the best research, so that the author's article finds place along with other high quality scholarly articles, and provides maximum (and long-term) visibility and access to the article.²

Authors' transparency ratings are directly associated with quality of the peer-review process.³ Mistakes in the literature, wrong findings, imitated data, poorly written scientific manuscripts, or non-reproducible studies serve to lessen public trust in science and its findings. Therefore, there is every necessitate to strengthen the validity of data that exists in the science literature to build and sustain trust among peers.⁴ Journals with higher transparency ratings are more likely to reject the flawed paper and showed higher impact as measured by the h5 index from Google Scholar.³

Journals were available only on paper till the mid-1990s, and most journals had moved to online platforms by the end of the 20th century. Online publication has also served as the thrust for the move to 'open-access' (OA) to the information contained in journals.¹ With the establishment of the Budapest Open Access Initiative, the OA movement officially started in 2002. The objective of the OA movement is to remove access barriers, accelerate research, and thereby promoting worldwide welfare.⁵

Some OA journals have attained a high scientific status in their field, and appear to be comparable to their print competitors. Publishers in so-called 'mega journals', have also started nurturing with unique forms of peer review, which only check the scientific rigor and validity; while the significance of the results is left to the readers to decide.⁶ The amazing success of such a leading mega journal, PLOS ONE that publishes nearly 30,000 articles every year, shows that authors welcome this model.⁶ On the contrary, many journals are seen to retract duplicate/ plagiarised publications to maintain its reputations intact.⁷

Some Open-access journals (OAJs) are self-archiving in a repository. An OA mandate is a policy adopted by a research institution, research funding agencies, or government

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which requires researchers to maintain their published, peer-reviewed journal articles and conference publications OA.⁸ There are multiple ways in which authors can provide OA to their own work — one way is to publish the article and then self-archive that in a repository where it is freely available, such as their own institutional repository, or a central repository such as PubMed Central (PMC) called “green OA”.⁹ Traditionally, the author should transfer the copyright to the journal publisher. Publishers claimed that this was obligatory to protect author’s rights. However, many authors found this insufficient, and have used their influence to a gradual shift towards a license to publish instead. Under such an arrangement, the publisher has permission to edit, print, and distribute the article commercially, but the author(s) preserve the other rights themselves.⁸ Some researchers also index their works in some existing publication indexing systems/other databases (e.g. research gates) (“green OA”). In another way, authors (or their institution/ funding agency) pay a specific fee often referred to as “article processing charge” (APC) for the expenses of the publishers, and authors can create their research output immediately available by publishing them in an OAJ (“gold OA”).⁹ Creative Commons (CC), a nonprofit organization, facilitates the sharing and use of creativity and knowledge through free legal tools. The free, easy-to-use copyright licenses grant a simple, standardized procedure to allow the public permission to share and use creative work. CC licenses let one easily change his/her copyright terms from the “all rights reserved” to “some rights reserved”.⁸

Although the OA model, need not reduce scientific rigidity, selectivity, or peer review; the “author pays” model creates an intrinsic conflict of interest: it manages with the incentive on the part of the journal to publish more and reject less. This combines with cost containment measures that concern the journals’ ability to appoint

experienced editors and professional staff to scrutinize data, data analyses, and author’s conflicts of interest.¹⁰

As the number of publishers has increased exponentially with time, the OA concept has been exploited.¹¹ Though the overall average APC is estimated as high as 178 USD per article as the average calculated over journals,⁶ the reported earnings otherwise for publishers per article can be as high as 3000 USD per article.¹² The “gold open access” model of publishing when mixed with a non-existent peer review intimidates to blur the distinction between science and pseudoscience,¹³ inviting the door for “predatory” publishers.

The predatory publishing greatly affects both bioethics and science at large¹⁴. Journal content varied widely.¹⁵ They mostly have imaginary editorial boards, do not undergo any peer review or quality control, are unclear about payment requirements, include plagiarised content and publish whatever somebody will pay them to publish. They undermine the scholarly information and publishing environment with a deluge of poor quality, unchecked and invalidated articles.² The “international” tag of such journals often misleads their true origins.¹³ Moreover, there is always a threat of these publishers disappearing overnight and with it all the published research work including the genuine one,¹² thus losing the scholarly record. This brings about a worrying erosion of trust in scientific publishing.¹⁴

The publication volumes of predatory journals have rapidly increased from 53,000 in 2010 to an estimated 420,000 articles in 2014, published by approximately 8,000 active journals. Asia and Africa contributed three quarters of authors.⁶ Despite a total number of journals and publishing volumes comparable to recognized [indexed by the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)] OAJs,⁶ the root of many so-called predatory OA global/ world/ international journals

could be traced back to countries like India and Nigeria.⁷

The modus operandi of predatory journals is straightforward; they spam academic e-mail lists with journal announcements, calls for papers, review invitations, and invitations to serve on editorial boards. Though, they declare to get the article peer reviewed but in reality, their peer review process is an eye wash. Some publishers yet promise a super-fast review, in lieu of fast-tracking charges.¹² They may accept many or all submissions and subject them to little, if any, peer review or editorial oversight.¹⁶

However, it is impossible for journals indexed in Medline or the DOAJ to send personalized invitations to prospective authors inviting manuscript submission, except an invited commentary or editorial. Some journals, of course, may ask peer reviewers whether the manuscript they are reviewing warrants an editorial and whether the reviewer might be interested in writing it or recommending a recognized expert who could be invited. Many journals have high rejection rates for manuscripts, a phenomenon which is unsuited with inviting this many submissions.¹⁷

According to the IFCC Ethics Task Force (TF-E) publication ethics is a continuous process, starting from the research design through to the information being read by the reader. In general, 'publication ethics' includes the ethical behaviour of the authors in writing and submitting a scientific document to a publisher for the purpose of publication; thus any discussion on publication ethics must include the role of the authors, referees, publisher and reader and the issues of authorship (and the use of 'ghosts'), plagiarism, duplicate publication (including in different languages), image manipulation, and conflict of interest. A number of resources are now available particularly those from the Committee on

Publication Ethics (COPE) and the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) to aid the authors, and others involved in the publication process.¹

While the number of erroneous and unethical research papers and wasteful, or 'predatory', journals is increasing exponentially, responsible editors find difficulties to 'clean' the literature by correcting or retracting related articles.¹⁸ Jeffrey Beall, a librarian in Denver, US, manages a blog site, called Think. Check. Submit. (<http://thinkchecksubmit.org/>), that names publishers and journals that he has identified as predatory, and separating disreputable journals from valid, high quality, open access journals.² Also, one needs to be extremely prudent in selecting a journal for the publication of a research paper, especially in terms of its impact factor, which are available in the Thomson Reuters' Journal Citation Reports (JCR) that included journals from all over the world including from India.¹⁹

Publishing scholarly articles in traditional and newly-launched journals is a responsible task, requiring diligence from authors, reviewers, editors, and publishers. There have been numerous attempts to discriminate genuine and illegal journals by blacklisting unethical journals (the Jeffrey Beall's list), issuing a statement on transparency and best publishing practices, and tightening the indexing criteria by the DOAJ. None of these measures alone proved to be sufficient.¹⁸ It was estimated that 7.8 % of journals from Beall's list are indexed in the DOAJ.⁶

There is an urgent need to reform the way in which authors, editors, and publishers conduct the first line of quality control, the peer review. One way to tackle the problem is through post-publication peer review, an efficient complement to conventional peer-review that allows for the continuous improvement and strengthening

of the quality of science publishing.⁴ There are also strategies to minimize receiving invitations from “predatory journals”. Many invitations have a journal unsubscribe link. Before deleting the invitation it might be worthwhile spending some time to unsubscribe the journal. All stakeholders of science communication should be aware of multiple facets of unethical practices and publish well-checked and evidence-based articles.¹⁸

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