



COMMENTARY

Predatory Publishers and Predatory Conferences: How to Avoid Them

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Introduction

Reporting research results is a central component of the scientific research process. This can be achieved through publication in scientific journals, conferences, symposia, among others. However, publication in scholarly journals remains the primary avenue for disseminating research findings. Publishing in journals is expressed in open-access and subscription-based models. The use of the open publishing model is increasing over time and is expected to be the dominant model in the future (Kerig, 2018). This is mainly due to the increased likelihood of articles being cited and it grants an immediate, smooth transfer of information. However, authors who submit their reports to open-access journals must pay submission/publication fees, commonly known as article processing charges.

Different forms of open-access models exist. One such form is the so-called “gold” open-access model, which requires the authors and/or their institutions to pay hundreds to thousands of dollars to retain copyright to the article. In this case, the article is open to everyone without charge. The second form is called the “green” open-access model. In this model, authors pay a lower fee than for the “gold” form, with some restrictions on the author’s ability to distribute the published article.

Predatory journals use the open-access publishing model to make money from scholarly publishing in a fraudulent way (Benyó et al., 2024). Predatory journals exploit the number of published articles by publishing articles without a valid peer-review process.

In parallel with the increase in the use of the open-

access publishing model, predatory journals are increasingly appearing. Common characteristics of predatory journals are dishonesty, inadequate transparency, poor quality, focus on profits, invalid peer-review process, and fake indexing information. Predatory conferences that are organized by non-professional organizations are also increasing in popularity. Such conferences attract researchers by holding conferences in attractive tourist places and offering them to publish in predatory journals they own in exchange for registration/publication fees (Ibrahim & Saw, 2020).

Therefore, predatory journals and predatory conferences are considered fake/trash, because they prioritize profit over academic standards. Some authors fall victims to such predators, because they are pressured to publish, as publications are considered a norm by various institutions for academic and professional advancement. In addition, authors of theses/dissertations and young researchers looking for the experience of scientific presentation and publication are the typical victims of such journals.

Publishing in predatory journals from developing countries is common. Awareness about predatory publishers should be raised among researchers in such countries. Therefore, this commentary highlights the impact and characteristics of predatory journals and predatory conferences. In addition, strategies that can be utilized to avoid such predatory journals and conferences are highlighted.

Predatory Journals

Characteristics of Predatory Journals

There are no fixed criteria for ranking a journal as predatory. However, there are agreed characteristics of predatory journals among the scientific community. The critical characteristic is an invalid peer-review process. Most predatory journals have a fake or no rigorous peer-review process. Some predatory journals pretend on their website to have a valid peer-review process, but without practicing what they claim. In addition, predatory journals are usually not listed in standard journal directories (e.g. Scopus, and Clarivate) and usually provide false claim on their websites with this regard. To attract researchers, predatory journals offer short processing time of submitted manuscripts, a high rate of acceptance, and pretend to have a high ranking by reporting illegitimate impact factors, such as Journal/World/Science Impact Factors (El Bairi et al., 2024). Moreover, predatory journals lack policies or methods regarding long-term archiving of published articles, conflict of interest declaration, authorship, publication ethics, and copyright. To give the predatory journal a global look, a long list of international editorial board members is usually presented on their websites, without providing sufficient information about their affiliations. Predatory journals target researchers by frequent invitations *via* e-mail that they are accepting manuscript submissions and need articles for the upcoming issue. The e-mail usually includes an invitation to join the journal's editorial board. Such emails sometimes highlight a recent publication by the target researcher and often contain grammatical and linguistic errors. Finally, predatory journals are usually hosted by unknown publishers and there is no or limited information about the host country and the owners.

The Scientific Impact of Predatory Journals

Predatory journals publish hundreds of thousands of articles every year. In 2014, it is estimated that predatory journals published more than 400,000 articles with revenue estimated at more than \$75 million (Alvarado-de-la-Barrera & Reyes-Terán, 2020). Predatory journals are considered a threat to the scientific community and the public. Without a rigorous review process, findings and conclusions published by predatory journals would contaminate the existing body of knowledge. In addition, publishing in predatory journals harms the open-access publishing model that aims to disseminate

knowledge. It also encourages unethical practices among authors, especially if the author gets a promotion at his institution based on publications in such journals. The reputation of authors and the trust of their institutions may be negatively affected by publication in predatory journals (El Bairi et al., 2024). Young scientists and students are more likely to publish in predatory journals than seniors. This may also affect their future career.

The widespread proliferation of predatory journals would complicate the advancement of newly emerged legitimate journals, especially new journals published by institutions and legitimate publishers from developing countries. In addition, young researchers and students may not be able to distinguish between findings published in legitimate scientific journals and results from predatory ones. This may have a negative impact on the quality of student grant proposals that rely on findings published in predatory journals. Therefore, significant efforts and training are needed to overcome the threat of predatory journals to the scientific community and the public (El Bairi et al., 2024).

How to Avoid Predatory Journals

Several techniques can be used to identify predatory journals. A combination of these techniques can distinguish between legitimate and predatory journals. Examining the website of the Journal for language mistakes is one of these techniques. Shamseer et al. (2017) examined the websites of known predatory journals, open-access legitimate journals, and subscription-based journals. They reported that the majority of predatory journals had spelling/grammatical errors on their websites, compared to less than 6% of legitimate journals (Shamseer et al., 2017). Careful evaluation of a journal's homepage for typos, spelling errors, or grammatical errors can be helpful to identify predatory journals quickly. However, identifying such errors by non-native speakers may not be an easy task, and this limits the use of this approach. A second technique is examining the transparency of the Journal with regard to peer review and publication procedures, copyright, management of conflict of interest, revenue sources, and publication ethics (such as standards of authorship, data availability, and retraction procedures). Authors should examine the information provided by the journal regarding the editorial board, submission system, and journal metrics. Some predatory journal

websites lack an International Standard Serial Number (ISSN) or use one that belongs to another legitimate Journal. In addition, predatory journals usually adopt a name that can easily be confused with the name of another legitimate journal. The submission system of many predatory journals is usually done by sending the manuscript *via* e-mail created in free e-mail directories, such as Yahoo or Gmail. The journal's contact information is usually missing, or the information provided is false. In some cases, the editor-in-chief owns the journal and many other journals in different fields.

Several websites were developed that provide a list of predatory and questionable journals. Examples of these sites is the Beall's list (<https://bealllist.net>). This list was the first to target predatory journals and is helpful in guiding authors to avoid such journals. Other websites are "Stop Predatory Journals" (<https://predatoryjournals.com>) and Cabells Scholarly Analytics' blacklist. The criteria that these sites primarily use to list a journal as predatory include the peer-review process, editorial board/services, journal policy, business practices, publishing and archiving processes, site quality, indexing, transparency, ethics, and journal metrics. Authors can apply the "Think. Check. Submit" strategy (<https://thinkchecksubmit.org>) to avoid falling victims to a predatory journal (Cook et al., 2023). This website helps authors identify well-established journals and publishers to avoid predatory journals.

Another technique that can be used to avoid predatory journals is selecting a journal from legitimate journals indexed in databases/organizations, such as Clarivate's master journal list, Scopus, and Cumulated Index in Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL). Checking whether the journal publisher has membership in known publishing organizations, such as the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), can also be useful.

General Recommendations Regarding Predatory Journals

An effective strategy to limit the spread of predatory publishers is to modify the norms of professional development, especially in developing countries, that are based on publications. This may relieve the pressure to publish. In addition, legitimate journals may consider waving or reducing publication charges for authors from low- and middle-income countries. This may negatively

impact the predatory business of predatory journals. Finally, legal actions may be taken against the businesses of predatory journals for not providing the services that they advertise.

Predatory Conferences

Importance of Scientific Conferences

Conferences are essential for scholars to disseminate, discuss, and receive feedback on their recent findings from peers who are experts in their fields. Conferences are also an opportunity for students to learn through accompanying workshops and masterclasses presented by esteemed experts and leading researchers. Conferences also help graduate students learn about recent research developments and field trends. Conferences can be divided into specialized meetings and general/ interdisciplinary conferences. Interdisciplinary conferences attract researchers and students from different fields to disseminate their findings and seek multi-disciplinary collaboration.

Characteristics of Predatory Conferences

Predatory conferences are fake/commercial conferences organized by non-professional organizations/bodies to attract researchers by holding conferences in attractive tourist places and offering them to publish in predatory journals that they own in exchange for registration/publication fees (Ibrahim & Saw, 2020). Like predatory journals, predatory conferences send invitation e-mails to attract researchers from personal email accounts of public domains, such as Yahoo and Gmail. Invitation e-mails usually contain grammatical and spelling mistakes. In most cases, the invitation refers to an article published by the researcher to present at the conference and be a speaker (Sharma & Verma, 2020). Many predatory conferences are multi-disciplinary to attract a good number of researchers from a wide range of disciplines to generate more money and benefits from holding the conference. Such conferences adopt a generic conference name beginning with words, such as "International", "Global" or "World" to give a prestigious and attractive look (Ibrahim & Saw, 2020). Predatory conferences are characterized by mock review process for submitted abstracts. In most cases, abstracts are accepted within a few days of submission. In addition, submission remains open until a few days before the start of the conference. Registration fees are usually paid by transferring fees to personal bank

accounts (Sharma & Verma, 2020). Predatory conferences are usually associated with giving awards to all speakers by holding what is called the “ceremony of certificates” to provide a prestigious look to the conference. In addition, they are usually organized on a weekly/monthly basis rather than annually, as is the case in most legitimate conferences organized by scientific societies/academic institutions. Therefore, information about key speakers, detailed conference agendas, and previous conferences are usually lacking from most of such conferences.

Promotion for the predatory conference on the conference website uses general statements that can be applied to any conference in any discipline. For example: “The goal of the conference is to advance knowledge and practices in”. bringing together researchers in ... to discuss and share recent findings....”. In addition, predatory conferences promote for their event by giving offers to researchers to publish the submitted study as a full article in one of the predatory journals owned by conference organizers (Asadi, 2019).

Negative Impacts of Predatory Conferences

Predatory conferences waste researchers’ time and resources. If the research/academic institution pays the registration fee and travel expenses, it wastes the institution’s resources and will also affect its reputation. In addition, the predatory conference will compete with legitimate conferences organized by professional organizations and academic institutions.

How to Avoid Predatory Conferences

Researchers should inspect the conference website and check the site for spelling and grammatical errors. Researchers should also inspect the archive of previous conferences and ensure that the conference is organized by a professional body/institution and that the conference is only offered once a year. In addition, junior researchers and graduate students should consult senior researchers at their institutions for advice on questionable conferences. Institutions can blacklist conferences found to be predatory to prevent their researchers from falling victims to such predators. Like predatory journals, researchers can use the “Think”, “Check”, and “Attend” approach (<https://thinkcheckattend.org/>) to avoid such conferences. Finally, researchers intentionally using

institutional resources to attend predatory conferences should be penalized by their academic and research institutions and funding bodies.

Predatory Books

Predatory publishers include open books in their businesses to gain revenue. Thousands of books are published every year through these publishers. Like predatory journals and conferences, predatory book publishers target researchers by sending them e-mails highlighting a recent publication by the targeted researcher and often containing spelling/grammatical mistakes. In most cases, invitations refer to an article published by the researcher to modify slightly and to be published as a book chapter. Authors pay publication fees to publish the book chapter (Ross-White et al., 2019). The only benefit to authors is having book chapters in their curriculum vitae. Predatory book publishers also target student authors to publish their theses/dissertations in book form.

How to Avoid Predatory Book Publishers

Predatory book publishing can be avoided by knowing legitimate book publishers. A list of legitimate book publishers can be found on the websites of academic institutions. Authors also can use a “Think”, “Check” and “Submit” book and chapter approach similar to that used to avoid predatory journals (<https://thinkchecksubmit.org/books-and-chapters/>). Authors should also check the book’s editor, print run, promotional plan, and publisher’s reputation before sending their work to be published.

Conclusion

Predatory journals and conferences pose a threat to the scientific community and the public by wasting researchers’ time and resources. Revealing the characteristics of these predators will enhance researchers’ awareness and improve their abilities on how to recognize and avoid them. Academic, health, and research institutions should adopt effective strategies to reduce the influence of predatory publishers. These should include training researchers on how to avoid predatory publishers and diversifying the criteria used for academic and professional promotions that currently rely primarily on publications.

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