

# Handout Predatory Publishing

Following the changes in the market for academic publishing, the number of journals in the market has risen considerably. In some disciplines the variety of titles is barely manageable. In this environment operate some journals that do not feel committed to the rules of good scientific practice, but use the academic publishing market as a business model on behalf of their publishers. These so-called predatory journals demand publishing fees, usually described as APCs (article processing charges) from authors without providing the editorial and quality-assuring services, especially a proper peer review<sup>1</sup>.

The publication of research findings in such journals primarily hurts the authors involved, but it also weakens the public's confidence in science<sup>2</sup>. Given the situation, an assessment of the predatory publishing phenomenon seems indicated. The following pages give a brief survey and supply tools to protect against predatory publishers.

## What differentiates predatory journals from serious journals?<sup>3</sup>

As mentioned before, the main difference between predatory and serious academic journals is the almost total lack of editorial and quality-assuring measures. Typical characteristics of such pseudo-academic journals are:

- They offer no cost transparency. The journal's website usually gives no information which costs accrue for what.
- They list misleading or false details about alleged impact factors.
- Contrary to their promises, they provide no or insufficient quality assurance (such as peer review and editorial work).
- In their editorial boards, they list scientists without their knowledge or even against their will.
- They market themselves aggressively, for instance by mass mailing personalised emails to potential authors.
- They imitate the name or the web presence of established journals.

## What part do predatory journals play within the system of academic publishing?

The predatory journals phenomenon has been around for at least ten years, but the number of questionable journals has risen dramatically over the last few. In a study published in

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://os.helmholtz.de/open-science-in-der-helmholtz-gemeinschaft/open-access-der-goldene-weg/fags-zum-thema-predatory-publishing/> and [https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Predatory\\_Publishing&oldid=1813477127](https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Predatory_Publishing&oldid=1813477127)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hrk.de/positionen/gesamtliste-beschluesse/beschluss/detail/stellungnahme-predatory-publishing>

<sup>3</sup> <https://predatoryjournals.com/about>

2015, Shen and Björk<sup>4</sup> find that in 2014 nearly 8,000 predatory journals existed which published around 420,000 articles in all. Others estimate more conservatively and assume 4,000 predatory journals and 135,000 published articles in 2014<sup>5</sup>. This represents 6.5 to 13 per cent of all known journals<sup>6</sup> and 5.9 to 18.3 per cent of all scholarly articles<sup>7</sup>.

## Who publishes in predatory journals?

The relevant studies on predatory publishing find that the authors in predatory journals mostly come from Africa and Asia (especially from India and Pakistan). The share of authors from these regions ranges from 75 to 90 per cent<sup>8</sup>.

In the summer of 2018, journalists from the NDR and other media companies found that in Germany more than 5,000 authors have published in predatory journals<sup>9</sup>, but most of them are “one-off publishers” and only a few are prolific writers<sup>10</sup>. Measured against the total number of academic personnel at universities and extra-university research institutions (circa 290,000<sup>11</sup>), this represents a share of 1.7 per cent. Overall, only a small percentage of researchers publish in such journals.

## How relevant are predatory journals in economics and the social sciences?

For the complex of economics and social sciences, meaningful numbers are hard to come by because of the lack of overview surveys. There is, however, a study for the domain of economics (Wallace and Perri (2018) „Economists behaving badly: Publications in predatory journals“<sup>12</sup>).

Based on analysis for the year 2015<sup>13</sup>, the study identified 27 predatory economics journals which together published 1,284 articles. Among the 2,774 authors, 124 (i.e. 5 per cent) are registered with RePEc. This represents a share of 0.3 per cent of all authors registered with RePEc. The majority of authors contributed only to one publication in a journal.

A comparison of these numbers with interdisciplinary surveys finds a below-average usage of predatory journals in economics.

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<sup>4</sup> Shen and Björk BMC Medicine (2015) 13:230 DOI 10.1186/s12916-015-0469-2

<sup>5</sup> <https://walt.lichost.org/2015/11/ppppredatory-article-counts-an-investigation-part-1/>

<sup>6</sup> According to „Ulrichs Web of Serials“ worldwide more than 60,000 academic and scholarly journals exist, see [http://www.ulrichsweb.com/ulrichsweb/analysis/help/usas\\_faq.asp](http://www.ulrichsweb.com/ulrichsweb/analysis/help/usas_faq.asp)

<sup>7</sup> according to the World Bank, the total number of articles in scholarly journals amounted to 2.3 million in 2014: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ip.jrn.artc.sc>

<sup>8</sup> Shen und Björk (2015) summarise: “The regional distribution of both the publisher’s country and authorship is highly skewed, in particular Asia and Africa contributed three quarters of authors.”

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/FakeScience-Fragen-und-Antworten.fakescience198.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://scilogs.spektrum.de/relativ-einfach/abzock-zeitschriften-den-daten-auf-der-spur/>

<sup>11</sup> according to the Federal Statistical office, 242,000 persons in 2016 had a primary job as academic staff at universities (see <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/248211/umfrage/personal-an-deutschen-hochschulen-nach-personalgruppen/>), almost 50,000 scientists are employed in extra-university research, see <https://www.bundesbericht-forschung-innovation.de/de/Ausseruniversitaere-Forschungseinrichtungen-1654.html>

<sup>12</sup> Wallace, F.H. & Perri, T.J. Scientometrics (2018) 115: 749. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-018-2690-1>

<sup>13</sup> The analysis used the RePEc database, a comprehensive catalogue of publications and researchers in economics (see <http://repec.org/>).

## Are predatory journals a consequence of Open Access?

There is a connection insofar as predatory journals rely on a business model based on publication fees, as do many Open Access journals. However, serious Open Access journals charge these fees *only after* the decision has been made to accept the publication, based on the results of a peer review, and not before. Moreover, almost 70 per cent of all journals listed in the Open Access Journals (DOAJ) do not charge any publication fees<sup>14</sup>. This is true especially for Open Access journals in the humanities and social sciences, where publication fees have not yet found general acceptance.

## How can researchers protect themselves against publishing in a predatory journal?

- The portal **Think – Check – Submit**<sup>15</sup> supplies a good overview of the criteria needed to tell predatory from serious journals.
- The **Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)**<sup>16</sup> provides a whitelist of renowned Open Access journals.
- The joint guidelines on transparency and best practice of the **Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)**<sup>17</sup> can also be helpful.
- The **Open Access Scholarly Publishing Association (OASPA)**, a network of trustworthy Open Access publishers, provides a list of criteria on its website<sup>18</sup> that members of the association must meet.

## What measures are available to scientific institutions?

Scientific institutions can consult and inform young researchers. The German Rectors' Conference (HRK) refers to supervisors and co-authors as important counsellors who are particularly qualified to impart knowledge of subject-specific publishing practices.

In addition, scientific institutions should ensure that the quality of scientific output is taken into account during employment and appointment procedures, but also for person-related evaluations.

This can be done with the following institutional procedures:

- the adoption of institutional publishing guidelines, perhaps as an aspect of
- the rules of good scientific practice
- the non-consideration of publications in predatory journals for evaluation procedures, appointment procedures and publication funds

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://sustainingknowledgecommons.org/2018/02/06/doaj-apc-information-as-of-jan-31-2018/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://thinkchecksubmit.org/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://doaj.org/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://publicationethics.org/resources/guidelines>

<sup>18</sup> <https://oaspa.org/membership/membership-criteria/>

- the consideration of accepted disciplinary journal rankings (e.g. those of professional associations) for evaluating output
- by using trained personnel (for instance Open Access commissioners) to consult and inform researchers in dedicated information and training sessions
- by imparting the skills to identify suspect publications
- by using blacklists to filter incoming emails from dubious publishers and journals