On Predatory Publishers: a Q&A With Jeffrey Beall

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If your incoming flow of email spam looks anything like mine, it probably features a regular invitation to submit an article to a journal you have never heard of, or to be a part of its editorial board, or maybe even to edit the journal. The names of the publishers vary, but the invitations usually look something like this one, which arrived last week.

Deae Carl Elliott,
I am very pleased that you can read this letter. Given the achievement you made in your research field, we sincerely invite you to join the Editorial Board for
the Advances in Bioscience and Biotechnology (ABB). We are looking for Editorial Board members and Editor-in-Chief with renewal options.

And if you attempt to find out more, very soon you will find yourself looking at Beall’s List of Predatory Open-Access Publishers (http://scholarlyoa.com/publishers), a sardonic, highly informative guide to a particular sort of publishing scam. The author of the list is Jeffrey Beall (http://carbon.ucdenver.edu/%7Ejbeall/), an academic librarian at Auraria Library, University of Colorado at Denver, and the man behind the Scholarly Open Access (http://scholarlyoa.com/) blog. He graciously agreed to explain the scam to me.

So what exactly is “predatory open-access publishing?”

Predatory open-access publishers are those that unprofessionally exploit the gold open-access (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_access_journal) model for their own profit. That is to say, they operate as scholarly vanity presses and publish articles in exchange for the author fee. They are characterized by various level of deception and lack of transparency in their operations. For example, some publishers may misrepresent their location, stating New York instead of Nigeria, or they may claim a stringent peer-review where none really exists.

Do you have any favorite scam journal stories?

The International Journal of Engineering Research and Applications created an award and awarded it to itself. (http://scholarlyoa.com/2012/02/15/a-totally-bogus-stand-alone-open-access-journal/) The statue of the award was ripped off from an Australian TV award.
MedKnow Publications confused the meaning of STM (Science, Technology and Medicine) and thought it meant Sports, Technology, and Medicine. Also, I just think that Greener Journals is ridiculous.

I see your point. The Greener Journals website says its aim is “create avenue for exploration, ravaging and manifestation of the world of knowledge.” Have you asked any members of the editorial boards of these journals why they allow their names to be listed?

No, I never talked to any of the Greener Journals editorial board members. I find that when I ask people why they are serving on a questionable publisher’s editorial board they become very quiet.

I have heard of several cases where predatory publishers list researchers on editorial boards without their knowledge or permission. Also, some agree to serve on one but then later change their mind, but the publisher never removes the name.

There seem to be a lot of publishers that originate in Nigeria and Pakistan. But I also found one in St. Cloud, Minnesota, just up the road, called Scientific Journals International. Do you know anything about it?

Yes, I am very familiar with Scientific Journals International. I included this publisher in a comparative review I had published in the Charleston Advisor in April, 2010. The publisher is basically a one-man operation, and I
heard late last year that he has the operation up for sale. The owner uses a single ISSN for the whole site, a non-standard practice. (ISSN’s are normally applied at the journal title level, not at the publisher level. Every journal is supposed to have a unique ISSN.) He also uses one giant editorial board for all his journals.

Does any particular discipline seem over-represented in predatory open access publishing?

Predatory open-access publishers prey mostly on researchers in the STM fields because that’s where the grant money is.

The open-access publishing model seems like a recipe for abuse: The more articles a publisher publishes, the more money it makes. And to be honest, it works the same way in universities: The more articles an academic publishes, the better his or her chances at promotion, tenure, salary increases, and so on. Do you have any suggestions for fixing the problem?

I agree. There are many that are abusing the system, taking advantage of the good will of the people who support open access and are trying to make it work.

I don’t have a solution, only some ideas. One might be some cooperative agency that does the opposite of what I have been doing. The agency would list the good open-access publishers, and people would be encouraged to support them. Actually, there is already an organization, OASPA (Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association) that tries to do this, but clearly they haven’t been successful.
I support what I call “platinum open-access.” This is open-access without author fees, and with the publication costs supported by volunteer work and benevolent funders. There are a few publishers that now use this model, but it’s not sustainable and it’s not scalable to all of scholarly communication. The only truly successful model that I have seen is the traditional publishing model.

What about punishment? Is there any way to sanction the disreputable open-access publishers?

Not that I know of. In many cases, the predatory publishers are not doing anything illegal. Their work is just unethical. Plus, the publishers are scattered around the globe, and each country has different laws.

On the other side of the equation, of course, there are the academics that sign on with the journals, or even publish their articles there. It seems as if part of the problem is the university status system. There is no real downside to publishing articles in crappy journals. At least not in medicine, where the main aim seems to be to build a massive CV (and to generate lots of grant money, of course.)

Yes, some academics are abusing the system. They submit weak papers to predatory publishers and then take credit for them when they apply for promotion or tenure. However, many of those publishing in predatory journals are graduate students and junior faculty who lack the experience to recognize the predators. The publishers have learned to exploit this naivete.

Tenure and promotion committees need to change (and many are changing). They need to be able to identify scholarly vanity presses and to
properly assess articles published in them. Mentors should steer junior faculty away from scam publishers and direct them to top-tier journals.