

The “problem” of predatory publishing remains a relatively small one and should not be allowed to defame open access



*A recent investigation led by an international group of journalists raised concerns over the scale of the problem of deceptive publishing practices, with many researchers of standing and reputation found to have published in “predatory” journals. However, while the findings of this investigation garnered significant media attention, the robustness of the study itself was not subject to the same scrutiny. To **Tom Olijhoek** and **Jon***

***Tennant**, the profile afforded to investigations of this type causes some to overstate the problem of predatory publishing, while often discrediting open access publishing at the same time. The real problem here is one of education around questionable journals, and should not distract from more urgent questions around the shifting scholarly ecosystem.*

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Imagine you want to investigate the quality of restaurants. You know beforehand there are bad restaurants. So you set up your investigation by going to a number of bad restaurants of bad reputation. What do you find? You find that a number of restaurants are really bad, an inevitable conclusion. You even find that people of standing and reputation have visited these restaurants on occasion.

Would the conclusion here be that all restaurants are bad? Several investigations of this kind have looked into the problem of “predatory” or “questionable” publishers, the most famous being the [heavily criticised](#) and deeply flawed “sting operation” by John Bohannon in [Science magazine](#). In science speak, this is called doing an experiment without an appropriate control group, usually sufficient for research to be desk rejected for being fundamentally flawed.

The latest such investigation, led by an international group of journalists, revealed something already widely known: in a number of countries, a relatively small number of “fake” papers have been submitted to, and published by, relatively few known-to-be-questionable journals that engage in [deceptive publishing practices](#). The investigation built on this existing knowledge, and found that many of the journals to have accepted these articles had also published authors of name and fame, something which had often been overlooked before. It was said that in Germany, the main example used in the investigation, [more than 5,000 researchers](#) had published in such predatory or questionable journals, and the investigation in the UK also yielded the names of [5,000 researchers](#). A [report of the investigation](#) (unfortunately only available to view if you sign up for a two-week trial) showed a figure of geographical distribution of predatory publishers, without any attribution. The figure was taken from a highly-cited article by [Cenyu Shen and Bo-Christer Björk](#) that was published in 2015, but without appropriate reference.

The investigators quoted the estimated number of 420,000 articles in predatory journals, also taken from this publication without reference. This figure has been shown to be highly overestimated thanks to [meticulous research by Walt Crawford](#), who, using the same source data, estimated a number closer to the region of 135,000 articles. While this number is by no means small, it is a relative drop in the ocean considering that more than two million articles are published each year in English-language journals alone.

Publications about parts of this investigation are still appearing, and the popular press, including TV and radio, has paid a lot of attention to this international collaboration. In many cases, however, it does not appear that the source data or methods were widely shared with these media outlets, and at present they are not public. Indeed, one journalist involved, when asked for the data supporting this media campaign to be shared, responded that [the data could not be shared for legal reasons](#), despite also stating that the information is otherwise widely available online through web-scraping techniques. It seems strange that journalists appear not to want any form of independent verification of their work, given this is exactly one of the issues they are challenging within the scientific enterprise.

The investigation and many press releases and media attention suggest a link between predatory publishing and open access publishing, or at least traditional publishing models and research integrity.



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It is utterly incomprehensible that scientists accept this kind of investigation as sound. The methods appear opaque and flawed, at least partly plagiarised, the data are inaccessible and unverifiable, and often reported on without independent journalistic scrutiny; all things we expect of any rigorous, research-based investigation, and especially one to gain international media attention of this scale.

The investigation and its coverage also largely fail to note that there are a range of existing efforts to combat this widely known issue. For example, what about the fact that there are at least 12,000 trustworthy open access journals indexed in [DOAJ](#), acting as a “whitelist” to combat the issue of questionable publishers? These journals have published more than 3.3 million research papers to date, and every day researchers are increasingly publishing in a wide array of reputable open access journals.

What about the fact that many predatory journals are subscription journals also? The problem here comes from opaque definitions of what characterises “predatory” publishing practices, across the whole publication ecosystem, and indeed far too much opacity around the entire publishing process and system. We need to view this “problem” in perspective in order to assess its *relative* importance!

This leads one to the question of why this campaign was started in the first place, what its intention was, other than to more widely spread information about something already generally known by the research and publishing communities. In a [paper last year, Martin Eve and Ernesto Priego](#) queried who is actually harmed by “predatory publishers”. They concluded that real harm is basically negligible to virtually all stakeholder groups, and indeed that “established publishers have a strong motivation to hype claims of predation as damaging to the scholarly and scientific endeavour while noting that, in fact, systems of peer review are themselves already acknowledged as deeply flawed”. This issue of peer review was also noted in a recent [Lambert Heller post](#), which recommended transparency as the best remedy for any potential harm caused by predatory publishers. This understanding is important, as it comes at a time when radical ecosystem shifts are occurring, such as the [recent launch of Plan S](#) in the EU. Given these potentially seismic shifts, we need to make sure our conversations stay focused on the real, larger issues at hand, such as why each year we continue to funnel billions of dollars of public funds into the hands of corporate giants that impose a tax on access to public knowledge and education.

In the meantime the discreditation of open access is showing effect. Scientists, governments, and journalists claim that predatory publishing is a big problem for scientific communication caused by open access based on the “facts” uncovered by a worldwide investigation. Predatory publishing is, in fact, only a minor nuisance caused by scientists who don’t follow simple rules on where to publish. These simple rules are excellently described by [Think, Check, Submit](#), a fantastic tool for researchers who aren’t sure about the legitimacy of a journal. In addition, scientists could pre-select safe open access journals by using the [DOAJ list of indexed open access journals](#), currently containing more than 12,000 journals. The problem of questionable publishers is more of an education problem, exacerbated by the fact that journals are still considered the primary communication and reward system for researchers.

The best way to help resolve this would be to include learning programmes on open science and open access as a mandatory part of undergraduate studies and PhD courses. This is something that is being worked on as part of a huge collaborative effort with the [Open Science MOOC](#) and other community-led trainings.

With these simple educational measures, the “problem” of predatory publishing would simply fade away, leaving ample choice of good open access journals to publish in. Furthermore, a recent cross-publisher initiative to support the [publishing of referee reports](#) could help to expose “predatory” practices almost immediately, as journals who refuse to share information on their peer review practices could be treated with greater suspicion. The only problem remaining will be the ever-rising costs of subscription publishing which will cause more and more countries to continue cancel their subscription packages.

But that is not the problem of publishers who only commit to open access. There are huge changes happening right now in the global scholarly publishing ecosystem. Yes, “predatory” publishing practices are a problem, but this is a relatively small issue compared to the fact that the vast majority of our global research corpus remains a private commodity owned by a small number of multi-billion-dollar corporations. Let us focus our efforts on the bigger problems here, and make sure that we are truly seeing the forest as well as the trees.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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