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Version: Published Version

Online resource:

Heimstädt, Maximilian and Dobusch, Leonhard (2020) To address the rise of predatory publishing in the social sciences, journals need to experiment with open peer review. Impact of Social Sciences Blog (10 Jan 2020). Blog Entry.

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To address the rise of predatory publishing in the social sciences, journals need to experiment with open peer review.



*Predatory journals are here, but our attention to them is unevenly distributed. Most studies on predatory publishing have looked at the phenomenon in the natural and life sciences. In this post, **Maximilian Heimstädt** and **Leonhard Dobusch** analyse the harmful potential of predatory journals for social science and specifically management research. Identifying key threats posed by predatory publishing, they argue that open peer review could stand to mitigate some of these challenges and foster a more constructive form of knowledge production.*

The open access paradigm has the potential to make the dissemination of academic knowledge faster and more equal, yet it also brings challenges. One of them is the rise of predatory open access journals. Predatory journals accept submitted manuscripts quickly (sometimes within a few days) and often fail to, or only superficially, conduct peer review, allowing them to greatly profit from [article processing charges](#). Current [estimates](#) show predatory publishing to be a growing trend, with a recorded ‘population’ of 1800 predatory journals in 2010, which grew to more than 8000 by 2014.

The threat of predatory publishing

Despite a growing awareness of the phenomenon of predatory publishing there has been a limited discussion of this issue within the social sciences. We therefore decided to explore predatory publishing in our own field: management research. To do this, we [conducted](#) an in-depth analysis of 639 predatory management journals that we identified based on [Cabell’s blacklist](#). Amongst a number of other issues, here we will focus on two interlinked threats these journals pose for management research and the social sciences more generally.

First, predatory journals are a threat to the field of management research, because they can be used strategically to legitimise management ideologies, morally questionable business models, or discriminatory HR practices. When journals claim to perform peer review, but refrain from doing so, they provide an ideal infrastructure for the “science-washing” of idiosyncratic ideas. Second, predatory journals can be used to de-legitimise disciplines (or sub-disciplines) through bogus articles. This was apparent in the recent sting publications targeting the discipline of gender studies, where weaknesses in peer review processes allowed the publication of spurious and bad faith research.

Cases such as these, highlight how the obscured nature of peer review provides opportunities, both for the unscrupulous business practices of predatory publishers and also to provocateurs seeking to undermine and discredit legitimate fields of research. Furthermore, a system designed to secure the integrity of rigorous academic quality control conversely makes it difficult for often marginalised research communities to demonstrate that they maintain high standards of research assessment.



Open peer review: Transparency and dialogue

Since the early 1990s scholars across fields have experimented with ways in which the double-blindness could be opened up in order to mediate problems like the ones described above. We believe that such forms of “open peer review” can curb predatory journals by creating a norm for scientific publishing which they cannot comply with, whilst at the same time increasing the rigour and relevance of research by including a broader range of stakeholders. Reviews on open peer review [find more than 120 definitions](#), yet the underlying practices can be grouped into two categories, each of them with their own implications for the dynamics of knowledge production.

Transparent peer review practices can be a means for reputable journals to differentiate themselves from predatory journals. When reputable journals decide to make visible the laborious work of authors, reviewers, and editors, predatory journals will not be able to match these efforts. Thus, identifying and de-legitimising journals that lack proper peer review becomes easier. Different forms of transparency can be used selectively, or combined depending on their fit with existing norms and routines within an academic community:

- **Open identities:** Authors and reviewers know each other’s identities.
- **Open reports:** Reports are published together with the accepted manuscript.
- **Open platforms:** Review is not organised by the issuing journal, but by another organisation.

Dialogical peer review practices enable more and new forms of communication between authors, editors, reviewers and other audiences. Dialogical peer review practices are an organisational means to foster developmental reviews and hence to create better and more interesting research articles. Such as with transparent review, various forms of dialogue can be used individually or in combination:

- **Open participation:** All members of the wider community can review an unpublished manuscript.
- **Open interactions:** Direct reciprocal discussion between authors and reviewers is possible and is promoted.
- **Open pre-review manuscripts:** Original manuscripts are made available on preprint servers before the review process begins.
- **Open final-version commenting:** Open commenting on the final manuscript is possible

Building an open peer review coalition

There are ongoing discussions about the potentially negative effects of open peer review, for example the risk that early-career scholars would be afraid to provide critical assessment of the work of an established scholar for fear of retribution. However, we believe that in the social sciences, the opportunities of open peer review justify at least experiments with different forms of openness, if only to better ascertain which forms of open peer review work better and in what contexts. However, to date we find that there are only very few journals in management research and in social sciences more generally, which dare to setup such experiments (with notable exceptions such as the [Journal of Peer Production](#)). To stimulate such experiments with open peer review, opportunities for advocacy work differ between roles on the publication system.

Editors and editorial board members have a clear position from which to advocate for open peer review. In the well-documented case of the subscription-based linguistics journal *Lingua*, the entire editorial board resigned simultaneously just to collectively launch a new open access journal, [Glossa](#). For more traditional journals, it seems unlikely that the entire peer review will be radically opened without piloting projects. We therefore recommend editors to advocate for experiments with openness in some supplementary section of the journal (e.g. essay or dialogue section).

Reviewers are also in a favourable position to advocate for open peer review, especially when they work in a field that is relatively scarce in terms of senior experts, but highly attractive to editors. In these cases, reviewers can make their willingness to review dependent on the condition that review reports and/or original manuscript are made openly available. At least, they have mostly the opportunity to share reviews via platforms such as [Publons](#), thereby signalling to journals their willingness to disclose their review reports and identity.

Early-career researchers seem to be in a less favourable position for advocacy work at first. However, they can serve as ad-hoc reviewers for journals that already experiment with greater openness, such as [Business Research](#), [Ephemera](#), or [Organization Theory](#) in the field of management research. Early-career researchers can further support candidates who run for positions in professional societies and who have expressed an interest in greater openness in academic publishing. As formal representatives in these bodies, these candidates can substantially shape the course of the associated society journals.

Ultimately, building an open peer review coalition and pushing for experiments with openness in management and other social science journals can not just help us curb the rise of predatory journals, but can turn this threat into a generative momentum towards more relevant and engaged scholarship. The time to start is now.

*This post draws on the authors' co-authored article, [Predatory publishing in management research: A call for open peer review](#), published in *Management Learning*.*

About the authors

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