

Cabell's International publishing blacklist: An interview with Kathleen Berryman

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ABSTRACT: On January 15, 2017, a blog that was maintained by a US librarian, Jeffrey Beall, was suddenly shut down. That blog was famed for its divisive and controversial content, namely two blacklists that in essence labelled open access journals and publishers as “predatory”. Beall showed that the entries on his lists increased annually, yet several publishing entities that had been blacklisted by Beall felt that they had been unfairly listed, causing, in some cases, reputational damage. In the vacuum that ensued in academic publishing quality control, a few entities tried to fill the gap to serve as a warning to academics. One of the organizations that stepped in was US-based Cabell's International, which created a blacklist of journals that did not fulfill their established criteria. This brief communication reports on a structured interview that was held in June of 2017 between the author and Kathleen Berryman, Cabell's project manager. Some perspectives on Cabell's whitelists and blacklists are provided.

Keywords: blacklists versus whitelists; open access; predatory behavior; unscholarly publishing



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The death of Jeffrey Beall's blacklists and blog

Academics are bombarded daily with endless email requests related to journals, publishing, editorial services and congresses. This deluge of invitations can be overwhelming, leaving academics, who are already strapped for time, with an overwhelming amount of choices of publishing venues. The vast majority, possibly even all, of these invitations, stem from open access (OA) journals and publishers. Not all of those publishers or journals that extend an invitation, either to submit papers, or to join editor boards, have good intentions. Some have the objective of being deceitful and to either abuse the trust of academics and their institutes by offering services that they in fact do not provide (e.g., false claims of peer review), by attempting to extract article processing charges (APCs) for undeserved services, or by misleading academics in a multitude of ways, activities that have now become associated with the term “predatory publishing”, a phenomenon that US librarian, Jeffrey Beall, popularized via his personal blog. On that blog, Beall created two blacklists, one of OA journals and the other of OA publishers. Although Beall had inclusion criteria, he failed to indicate the precise criteria for each of the entries in his lists. As a result, it was impossible to independently verify the validity of any entry, and appeals were done secretly, with an unknown appeals panel, or without any transparent public process, without any open disclosure of the outcome of appeals. As Beall's lists began to increase annually, some highly questionable entries began to emerge. They were questionable not because their publishing practices were necessarily questionable, but because they appeared to be legitimate publishing operations, no different to the OA operations of several mainstream publishers, but may have had some problems during their initial growth phase, as would be expected of any budding publishing operation seeking market establishment in an initial phase of growth. Other OA journals and publishers that Beall blacklisted were veritable “predatory” publishers.

It was inevitable that the task would be too great for a single person, or for an operation that was masked in opacity, and apparent legal threats and pressure from critical parties, including his own university, eventually caused Beall to shut down his blog (Beall, 2017). Beall had the responsibility of giving academics, funders, policy-makers and institutes enough time to adjust to this blog closure, and he should have made a public announcement early (Teixeira da Silva, 2018). This is because many had started to adopt his lists as official blacklists, limiting academics' choice of publication venues to only journals or publishers that were not on those lists, i.e., Beall's lists were biased, incomplete, skewed, erroneous and

discriminatory (Teixeira da Silva, 2017a, 2017b), and thus illegitimate (Crawford, 2016; Teixeira da Silva, 2020). The adoption of those lists was fortified around the world, especially after Beall called for a radical approach, namely the banning of “predatory” publishers (Beall, 2016).

The void created by Beall, and the action taken by Cabell’s International

Soon after Beall’s blog ceased, Cabell’s International took the initiative to start a new blacklist, and this received much attention on social media and even in the press, most likely because academics, their institutes, policy-makers, publishers and funders were caught off-guard by the Beall blog closure. Although some cloned sites exist with Beall’s old blacklists, these should not be used, especially the Internet Archive, because they are now more outdated and thus erroneous than they were in January of 2017. So, Cabell’s International took a historically opportunistic gap to create a new market product, a publishing blacklist. In some respects, this would not have been too difficult because this company had already maintained a whitelist that was sold, at a cost, to subscribing universities and research institutes. One of the mottos on the company website states: “To provide academics with accurate information and reputable outlets for publication.” Curious to learn more about the birth and development of this new blacklist, I contacted Kathleen Berryman, the project manager, on June 2, 2017, requesting a structured email interview in which I would pose 15 questions regarding their new product. Berryman responded promptly, politely and offered, without any restraints or objections, to respond to these queries, requesting, however, additional time in order to compile the responses. Berryman provided responses to all questions by June 8, 2017, an open-minded approach that contrasted starkly with Beall’s rapport with academics. Berryman further permitted the *verbatim* publication of our Q&A in an academic journal. Our interview is presented next.

The interview with Kathleen Berryman (Cabell’s International)

The numbered questions represent questions posed by Teixeira da Silva while the responses that follow are the *verbatim* responses by Berryman.

1. Is the blacklist based on Jeffrey Beall’s lists? If not, how do they differ?

While we respect Jeffrey Beall and will list many of the same journals that appeared on his lists, our Blacklist is not based on his work. Our Blacklist differs from Jeffrey Beall’s lists in

several ways. We have developed a set of criteria that we use to evaluate all journals suspected of deceptive behavior and we apply this criteria equally to all journals we review. We are also reviewing journals, rather than publishers, regardless of the type of access. This means that there will be subscription access journals on our list as well as open access journals. Finally, and most importantly, we are improving transparency by listing all of the reasons why each journal is included on our Blacklist.

2. Are the criteria based on the same criteria that Beall used for his lists? If not, can you reveal those criteria?

We researched not only Jeffrey Beall's criteria, but also the inclusion criteria for various well-known databases in the industry. We created a list of industry standards regarding publishing practices and used that information to develop our own criteria for assessing journals. While we did include many of Beall's points in our criteria, we chose to eliminate the ones that were based on opinion in order to increase the objectivity of our evaluations. Our criteria will be listed on our website when we launch our Blacklist on June 15.

3. Has Jeffrey Beall being assisting Cabell's International with the development of the criteria, or the lists, in any way? If yes, how so and since when?

Throughout the development of the blacklist, we consulted with several industry experts, including Jeffrey Beall.

4. Will the lists and the criteria used to black-listed journals be pay-walled, or only the list?

Our blacklist criteria will be available to everyone on our website. Due to the high cost of developing and maintaining our Blacklist, we are charging a subscription fee for access to the actual list. However, we are making every effort to keep the fee as low as possible and we are exploring other options to support this project.

5. Why are only journals being black-listed and not publishers? Is this in any way related to the possibility that Beall may have been sued or threatened by a publisher that may have been on his lists?

Sometimes, especially with larger publishers, the management of the journal is left in the hands of the editors. We do not want to punish legitimate journals for another journal's behavior simply because they are both published by the same company.

6. What price will be charged to access these lists and why can the price not be found on the Cabell's International web-page? Is this a one-off access price, or a yearly access?

As with our Whitelist, the subscription fee for our Blacklist will be on a sliding scale, based on full time enrollment of undergraduate students. It is for this reason that we choose not to make our prices available on our website. Contacting our sales team is the best way to receive a quote tailored to the needs of the individual.

7. Will the price to access the list be the same for individuals and institutions?

It is always better for the institution to subscribe, rather than individuals. This maximizes the number of people who benefit from our database and expenditures on services such as these are planned for in the university's budget.

8. Is there a relationship between the Cabell International white list and black list? For example, are any journals not listed on the white list automatically entered into the black list?

Our role is and has always been to provide safe and trusted publishing outlets to researchers from all geographical and institutional backgrounds. In doing so, we provide not only a database of reputable publications, but also a list of publications with deceptive behaviors. There will always be journals that do not meet the high standards of our Whitelist, but who are also not being deceptive. Exclusion from our Whitelist does not automatically mean inclusion on our Blacklist and exclusion from our Blacklist does not automatically mean inclusion on our Whitelist.

9. Is there any link with DOAJ's list of OA journals?

We have no affiliations with DOAJ and we include both open access and traditional access journals on both our Whitelist and our Blacklist.

10. Will the Cabell's International black list serve for OA and traditional print journals, or only OA?

We review and include both open access and traditional access journals for both our Whitelist and our Blacklist.

11. Why is the list not open access, which would surely benefit the global academic community the most?

We originally planned to make our blacklist available for free, but after analyzing the time and resources it took to create it—and the resources it will take to maintain it—we realized that it would not be sustainable. We are offering our blacklist as an optional add-on to our whitelist. We're making every effort to keep the subscription fee for the blacklist as low as possible, and we're exploring other options to support it in the future.

12. How can proposals for inclusion on the list be made? Who should be contacted? How can academics independently assess if they have found a “predatory” journal if they cannot access the criteria to be used?

Suggestions for journals to be reviewed for our Blacklist can be emailed to blacklist@cabells.com. This information can also be access from our website on our contact us page. We do not include journals on our Blacklist unless we have evidence of their poor publication practices, so we encourage anyone suggesting journals for review to send as much information about the journal as possible, including any emails, letters, screenshots, or any other information they have about the journal.

13. If, for example, an academic has proof that a journal has conducted no peer review and has charged APCs leading to automatic acceptance by a journal. Would this criteria alone suffice for inclusion on the black list, or does a journal have to fulfill several criteria to be included?

We used our criteria to create a rubric by which we evaluate journals for our Blacklist. It includes 65 specific violations that at as indicators of deceptive practices. Each violation was assigned a number of points based on the seriousness of the offense. Some offenses on our criteria are more serious than others. Proof that the journal has automatically accepted articles without peer review, and claims to perform peer review on all articles, is grounds for inclusion on our blacklist. This is one of the most serious offenses on our criteria and is one of the biggest indicators that a journals is being deceptive.

14. There appears to have been collaboration with Emerald Group Publishing and Elsevier (Scopus) on the list. Can you reveal the full list of contributors (publishers, institutions, academics, others) who established this list and contributed to its creation?

Throughout the development of the blacklist, we consulted with several industry experts. We also travel globally speaking to academic audiences about safe publishing practices. Many of the sessions we have hosted have included panel members from various organizations within the industry. However, in order to maintain our status as an unbiased third party, we are not collaborating with other companies or publishers on the creation of our Whitelist or our Blacklist.

15. Do you believe that your black list will impact the growth of so-called “predatory” publishers, journals, or publishing practices?

Impacting the growth of deceptive publishing practices has always been our goal with this project. We hope to empower our users to make informed judgements about journals, whether on the Whitelist or the Blacklist, by presenting the evidence and providing information.

Conclusions

Although some have advocated publicly against the existence of whitelists and blacklists, they continue to exist nonetheless, but they hold risks and errors (Teixeira da Silva and Tsigaris, 2018). Beall’s blacklists of OA journals and publishers that were broadly labeled as “predatory”, as well as the blog on which they were hosted, survived only a few years, but those lists caused tremendous reputational damage to some undeserving victims, while also offering guidance to countless others, even if some of that guidance may have been misguided. Academics, however, require open, transparent and independently verifiable lists of reliable publishing venues, as do their institutes and funders, so that precious intellect is not squandered on less-than-appreciated publishing venues. Beall’s blacklists were unreliable and opaque, as were appeals for delisting. In the vacuum created by the sudden retraction of the Beall blacklists, Cabell’s International stepped forward to provide a new blacklist to supplement their already existent whitelist, but they still relied on Beall himself (Bisaccio, 2018). However, individual academics may be reticent to use such lists because they are not free, or open. Thus, this market-driven blacklist seems to be targeted to universities or other policy-makers who might be willing to pay a premium on knowledge to trustworthy scholarly publishing venues, limiting somewhat their broader applicability. Another concern to academics is the inability to see precise criteria for each entry on those lists, also because those entries are not open to the public. This is precisely the same issue that plagued Beall’s blacklists. Therefore, even though inclusion or exclusion criteria are freely available on the

Cabell's International website, such criteria have zero practical value for academics who are trying to navigate treacherous publishing waters in an open science and open data era. Surely, for the greater good of academia globally, rather than to serve the purpose of corporate profits, Cabell's International socially responsible profile would benefit by providing a blacklist that is open to the public, for independent verification and challenge, and to avoid the same error made by Beall. In addition, criteria need to be ranked and quantified, as in the Predatory Score (Teixeira da Silva, 2013), which is now outdated, an issue that also cannot be independently verified by academics with no access to, or ability to pay for access to, Cabell's International blacklist.

Conflicts of interest

The author is a critic of the Beall (and other) blacklists. The author declares no other conflicts of interest of relevance to this topic.

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