

Hiding in Plain Sight: The Sinister Threat of Predatory Publishing Practices



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Many people will have read in October 2018 the frightening story of an education researcher from the University of Strathclyde in the United Kingdom who unwittingly paid to attend and present at an academic conference in Vancouver, only to realise that all was not what it seemed. In a [report](#) in the *Times Higher Education*, Dr Jane Essex described how she came to believe the event, organised by the World Academy of Science, Engineering, and Technology (Waset), was a so-called predatory conference, with multiple streams of research topics brought together under one roof with little of the quality controls or esteem expected of mainstream, legitimate conferences.

The experience of Dr Essex and fellow delegates, who called out the organiser and hounded them out of the conference venue never to return, is sadly not an isolated incident. Many journals and science magazines have reported in recent years how innocent academics answer emails offering opportunities to present at conferences that are sent by companies using the same tactics as those of predatory publishers. Knowing researchers need to present at conferences and publish papers to further their careers, they offer too-good-to-be-true chances to meet the publish-or-perish expectations of their institutions. However, the upshot is almost always the same—those academics are then mired in problems once their institutions uncover the truth about the event or publication, and it becomes a veritable albatross around their neck as they are unable to shake the link between themselves and the unsavoury activity they are assumed to be guilty of.

Deep Problems

As an operator in the scholarly communications space for 40 years, Cabells had been aware of the problem of predatory publishing while putting together its indexes of legitimate journals. When it released its Whitelist of such titles in 2017, as an update on the indexes it had published in the past, it also decided to offer an alternative to librarians and scholars increasingly concerned by the illegitimate titles that were swarming over vulnerable academic authors. So, to help to tackle the problem of predatory publishing it launched a [Blacklist](#) in the same year of some 4,000 journals that have been investigated and been found wanting against the 60+ criteria Cabells adopted to identify whether journals could be trusted or not. The product immediately became a talking point, and word-of-mouth support led to a flood of suspect titles being recommended, such that in late 2018 the Blacklist indexed its 10,000th journal.

On announcing that the Cabells Blacklist had reached 10,000 journals—now 10,604 in February 2019, to be precise—there have been two broad reactions. One group of people has said, ‘Wow, I didn’t even know there were 10,000 journals in total!’ while another group has said, ‘Wow, I bet that’s just scratching the surface.’ This underlines the challenge in estimating how large the problem of predatory publishing is, and however overwhelming it seems, thinking of ways to circumvent it.

Economies of Scale

One of the problems associated with predatory publishing is not merely the scale of the problem but how widespread it is. In developing countries there is a sizeable knowledge gap about which journals are legitimate or not and a growing pressure to publish in journals that are perhaps not in an author’s first language, and as a result, authors can be extremely vulnerable.

The scale of the problem in these countries is terrifying (Figure 1). Data collated by Cabells shows that:

- An estimated 400,000+ authors worldwide have published in predatory journals since 2003.

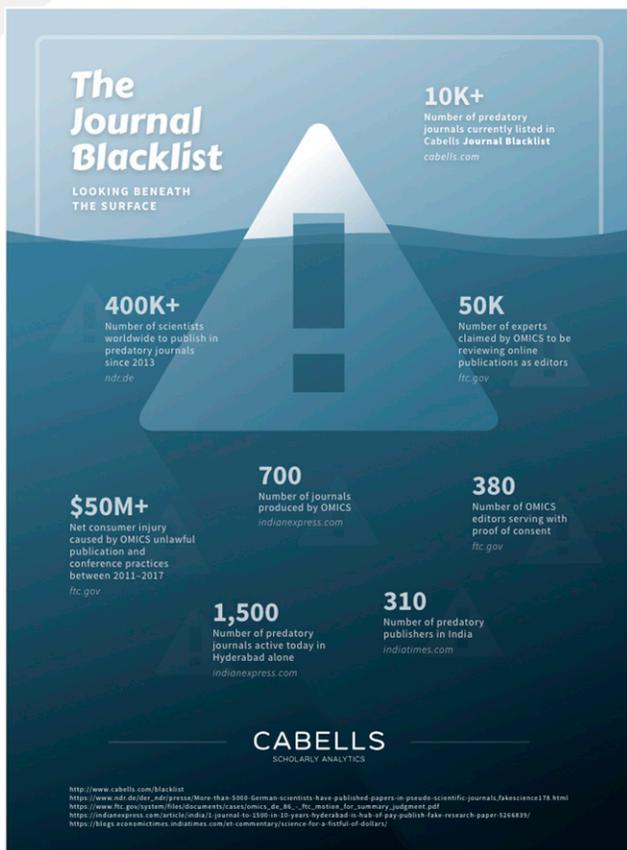


Figure 1. Predatory publishing statistics.

- There are over 300 predatory publishers active in India, with 1,500 journals based in Hyderabad alone.
- The net consumer injury caused by publisher OMICS' unlawful publication and conference practices between 2011 and 2017 was judged to be in excess of \$50,000,000.

Far from a 'victimless crime' as some commentators have said, every time a researcher submits their article to a journal believing it will go through a quality review process, they appear to be let down by those who seek to use the system to make a profit at the expense of the good will of researchers.

Global Impact

It is perhaps the amount of money changing hands for very little or no services being rendered that is perhaps the most shocking aspect of predatory publishing. In 2018, a German investigative team launched a sting, using the Cabells Blacklist database for their operation ([Süddeutschenzeitung.de](https://www.sueddeutschezeitung.de)). In order to paint a picture of just what happens during

the process of predatory publishing, the journalists published a sting paper (which among other things claimed to have found a cure for cancer and cited children's literature) in predatory journals for a fee. Journals were chosen whose publishers had also published influential German academics as well as articles published by representatives of the pharmaceutical industry.

Once an article was submitted, the (fictional) author was immediately invited to present the findings at conferences, with the paper accepted for publication within 5 days. The author was also invited to become a sponsor of the journal for an additional 10,000 Euros—in addition to the cost of publication of nearly 2,000 Euros—and recruited to join the editorial board of another journal. In the end, the journalists decide to retract their article from the journal, only to be told by the publisher that this would only be possible for an additional fee of over \$2,000. In total, the researchers submitted 13 sting papers to suspicious publishers, of which 10 were ultimately accepted for publication.

More recently, Canadian academic Derek Pyne was [suspended then reinstated](#) after blowing the whistle on his colleagues at Thompson Rivers University for publishing articles in predatory and low-quality journals. While publishing in such journals may harm some academics' careers, for others it may help them to keep their jobs or even get tenure, potentially at the expense of colleagues with publishing records in more legitimate outlets with better research. As such, the problem can infiltrate entire institutions and even national research programmes.

Editor Focus

Of course, none of these things should happen if an editor or team of editors is at the helm of a journal and are directing a robust peer-review process. But the role of editors and senior academics can be wider than this, and hopefully offer support and guidance to colleagues and members of their subject community. Editors are often the *de facto* guardian not only of the journal they preside over, but also oversee faculty and researchers, and therefore can advise them to use legitimate resources. Many have provided invaluable guidance over choosing the right journals to read, use, and publish in, a contribution made more and more difficult over time as the number of journals has grown exponentially. In a time of budget cuts within institutions and an increasingly fragmented publishing environment, editors have less opportunity for these activities, but no substitute has taken on this task.

Editors have a savviness and understanding of the journal world and are on hand to answer quick questions about

journals and legitimacy. It is to be hoped that the Cabells Blacklist can go some way to support these kind of challenges coming from other academics, and Cabells itself is currently working towards the development of a range of resources to complement this work.

Educate the Educators

If the problem of predatory publishing is to be solved, ensuring that all PhD researchers and early career scholars are equipped with the right information and skills to sniff out suspicious journals is essential. What may also need to be looked at is the publish-or-perish culture that leads to such poor decisions by academics when they submit to these journals. According to an article by Shen and Bjork in [BMC Medicine](#), over a third of authors publishing in predatory journals are from India, with a further quarter from Asia and 16% from Africa. Helping these authors and those like them that will make the same mistakes in the future should be a priority for everyone in the scholarly community. While some major policy decisions are required, in the meantime here are a

few simple pieces of advice that can help divert some very good research from some very bad journals:

- *Behavioral Indicators*: What is the track record of the journal you want to publish in? Look at its history and appearance online. Read the articles.
- *Look, But Don't Touch*: Use investigative skills to 're-research your research' before making any submission decisions.
- *Community Effort*: The placement of journals in the Cabells Blacklist, Whitelist, or official ranking is validated in part on information from the relevant subject communities—trust in your communities to help you choose a journal.
- *Metrics*: Use citation-based information, such as the Impact Factor, alongside other metrics, such as altmetrics, usage, and readership to ensure evidence-based decision making with a blended approach.
- *Transparency*: There are many databases that offer information but are not transparent. How and where did they get their data? Being critical of any information is vital to ensure optimal decision-making.

Ira Salkin Scholarship

The application process is open for the 2019 International Society of Managing and Technical Editors Ira Salkin Scholarship.

Ira was one of the founding fathers of ISMTE and sadly passed away in 2016. His goal was to ensure editorial office professionals are educated and vigilant in matters of publishing ethics.

The essay topic for 2019 is "How can editorial offices create proactive policies that make handling publication ethics matters smoother?"

The submission deadline for entries is **May 31, 2019**.

Eligible applicants must be members of ISMTE.

Applicants must include a short cover letter stating their position and some background.

Read the official [Rules and Regulations here](#).

We are looking forward to receiving your entries for the 2019 Ira Salkin Scholarship.