

Predatory Journals: Know Thy Enemy—What Editorial Offices Can Do to Educate Their Stakeholders



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Towards an Understanding of the Phenomenon

2017 saw yet more revelations on the pernicious and predatory nature of fake journals.¹ Picking up on some of the themes discussed in an earlier article² in *EON*, this article provides a brief summary of the results from one of the two papers that represented the culmination of several years of work by the Centre for Journalology in Ottawa in the form of a very large, systematic study of the so-called predatory journal phenomenon.³⁻⁴ In addition to providing a brief synopsis of the findings, this article will touch upon why editorial offices should care about predatory journals and what they can do to help curb the damage they wreak. In a follow-up article for *EON*, I will address the results of the second paper from the Centre for Journalology, which provided insights on who is publishing in predatory journals along with a study of what they were publishing.

The first article by Shamseer et al (of which I was a participant) published in March 2017 in *BMC Medicine*. It looked at multiple characteristics of a random sample of 93 presumed predatory journals (as found on Beall's List, that was then extant when the study commenced), 99 presumed legitimate open access journals ('legitimate' was defined by obviously being published by a well-known publisher), and 100 traditional subscription journals.³ Roughly half of the predatory journals were biomedical, the rest seemingly a confusing blend of literally anything and everything. All the open access and subscription journals were biomedical journals. The results were fascinating for two reasons. The

first was that by applying a variety of assessment criteria, we discovered that predatory journals were not all that difficult to identify. Until this study, however, no one has measured the prevalence of predatory-identifying criteria in comparison with legitimate journals. Collectively, as an industry, our capacity to detect predatory publications has undoubtedly been more instinctive rather than based on empirical evidence. The second impact of the results, at least to my eye as a practicing editorial office professional, was that sometimes the legitimate open access and subscription journals could have done a better job of providing homepages and Instructions for Authors that were comprehensive in relaying important information for all stakeholders. They also perhaps could have done a better job in ensuring their web presence was free of errors. These issues become problematic when we recognize that they are traits common to predatory journals.

As I write this article, six months on from the publication of the *BMC Medicine* paper, the most impactful element of the Shamseer paper has undoubtedly been the list identifying 13 salient characteristics of potential predatory journals. This list, reproduced here as Table 1, was built upon an analysis of the web presence of each journal included in the study. To complete the analysis, a detailed questionnaire was given to study investigators to enable them to check each journal in a standardized manner. The results gathered as part of that process informed the development of the list. The list, in essence, suggested there were several warning signs of the potential predatory nature of a publication. The intent of the list was to create a tool to better educate authors, but equally, the criteria had value for readers, reviewers, editors, and publishers.

The value of the list to authors is evident. Effectively, along with campaigns like [Think-Check-Submit](#), it represents a checklist which authors could use to assess the legitimacy of a publication to which they intended to submit—assuming they cared. As I discussed previously, it seems likely a fair proportion of authors of articles found in predatory journals are somewhat, if not fully, cognizant of the predatory nature of the publication to which they are submitting and care not.



Table 1. Characteristics of Predatory Journals.

1.	The scope of interest includes non-biomedical subjects alongside biomedical topics
2.	The website contains spelling and grammar errors
3.	Images are distorted/fuzzy, intended to look like something they are not, or which are unauthorized
4.	The homepage language targets authors
5.	The Index Copernicus Value is promoted on the website
6.	Description of the manuscript handling process is lacking
7.	Manuscripts are requested to be submitted via email
8.	Rapid publication is promised
9.	There is no retraction policy
10.	Information on whether and how journal content will be digitally preserved is absent
11.	The article processing/publication charge is very low (e.g., < US \$150)
12.	Journals claiming to be open access either retain copyright of published research or fail to mention copyright
13.	The contact email address is non-professional and non-journal affiliated (e.g., @gmail.com or @yahoo.com)

The most obvious reason for such ambivalence is that authors need a citation (perhaps for grant funding or promotion), and they know few people are paying enough attention to the legitimacy of the source.

Relevance of the Study Results for Editorial Offices

The results also have a lot of value for journals and their editorial offices. Rather than simply regurgitate all the data from the paper, I will, instead, dwell on the findings with greatest relevance for editors and editorial office staff, with my interpretation of what the implications are for our community.

One of the most alarming findings was that 54% of the predatory journals possessed a title that was very similar to another journal name. This is particularly problematic as it creates confusion. Authors, for example, (particularly irregular writers) might inadvertently submit to the wrong journal. Individuals might take up one of the myriad offers of an editorial board position not realizing they have been fooled by one of these like-sounding predatory journals. That creates a problem for legitimate journals because they may find they have missed the opportunity to publish a good article that was misdirected to a fake title or find that their genuine requests for article/peer review are ignored by authors and reviewers fatigued by receiving an onslaught of similar such emails sent by predatory journals. Obviously this problem of brand hijacking is not likely to be a setback for top

brands. But for the many thousands of smaller journals that do not stand out from the crowd, the problem is real. Furthermore, some editorial offices may be finding they are now devoting time to dealing with situations such as helping duped authors extricate their papers from a predatory publication as they bid to try and publish in the legitimate journal.

Unfortunately, there may be little legitimate journals can do to fight back. Upon finding a journal with a very similar title, many journals have likely consulted with their lawyer or publisher. However, the legal opinions that seem to be coming back all suggest that unless the name of a journal is specifically trademarked, there seems to be little to no grounds upon which to construct a legal fight back. Therefore, it is the recommendation of this author that all journals check the legal status of the journal's name immediately. If it is not already too late, it is strongly recommended you take action by trademarking your journal's name. Your publisher should be able to advise on this matter.

Another finding, which only goes to show why the current conflation of open access journals with predatory journals remains, is that 51% of the predatory journals claimed they were included in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). This compares with 65% of legitimate open access journals. This means the DOAJ branding, which already took a bit of a beating when it was found its initial version contained many illegitimate titles, is now undermined by predatory journals just making up their inclusion.⁵

This was not the only source of concern for open access journals trying to fight off encroachment from predatory journals. The study found that predatory journals were offering article processing charges (APCs) that were typically 18-fold lower than the legitimate journals included in the study. Clearly, for early-career authors or those in large parts of the world, the low fee is attractive. Rather perversely, one could argue, therefore, that the “high” APC of the legitimate journals is a badge of genuineness.

However, and this point is critical, legitimate journals could do a lot more to help distinguish themselves from predatory journals, and it is hoped that this research serves as a call-to-arms for legitimate journals to clean up their own acts. First of all, this means tightening up a journal’s web presence and ensuring essential items are present and correct. The study team before gathering data thought a good way to distinguish predatory journals from legitimate titles might be by determining whether or not an Editor-in-Chief was identified. The team found that 24% of predatory journals failed to do that, so this was promising as a potential identifier. However, we then found 17% of legitimate open access and 9% of traditional journals did not name their Editors either. Alarming, of the sample journal population, only 62% of the so-called traditional journals identified the institution where the Editor-in-Chief worked. That is truly a miserable statistic. The equivalent figure for predatory journals was 56%. At least legitimate open access journals did a better job, with 86% identifying where the Editor-in-Chief did their day job. This underwhelming performance by the legitimate journals is simply inexcusable, particularly as there is no obvious reason to not name the Editor-in-Chief and where they work, but many reasons why you should clearly identify who the final arbiter of acceptability is.

Additionally, spelling errors seem to be a good indicator of whether or not a journal is predatory. While 65% of predatory journal websites contained spelling errors, just 6% of legitimate open access journals contained spelling errors. By comparison, that latter figure doesn’t seem too problematic, but really that figure should be 0%. Before I cast stones at others, I fully admit I have found errors on my own journal pages. Perhaps the situation could be helped if we started to use standardized language in our Instructions for Authors. ISMTE is perhaps well placed to look at common components of text in Instructions for Authors and then maybe propose language or stock phrases we could all adopt.

The second way that this study can be used by legitimate journals to put some distance between themselves and the fake publications is to be inspired by the results to place greater emphasis on transparency of their peer-review processes. Only 56% of predatory journals actually described

their peer-review process either on their homepage or within the Instructions for Authors. Traditional journals (86%) and legitimate open access journals (90%) were much more likely to describe how peer review was managed. However, that figure should be 100%. Indeed, for biomedical journals that subscribe to the ICMJE principles, this is something you are supposed to do.⁶ For ethical reasons and as a way to improve the quality of peer review delivered, peer-review transparency is increasingly becoming a paramount need. Now we can add to this growing call for change another reason for moving away from our current position of relative opaqueness: the pressing need to distinguish ourselves from predatory journals. Of course, predatory journals could simply make things up. So, perhaps legitimate journals need to take the time to explain how peer review works to their constituents and to detail, for example, that it takes a little bit of time to secure manuscript evaluation from the world’s leading experts, certainly more than the impossible timelines predatory journals claim. From the study, 41% of presumed predatory journals promised an undefined “rapid publication,” compared to 16% of open access journals and 9% of traditional subscription journals (18% of predatory journals promised publication in under one week). Maybe there is a role for ISMTE here in leading the charge for greater transparency.

A Peer-Review Transparency Checklist

Finally, based upon the results of the study performed by the Ottawa group and cognizant of the need to help journals help themselves by cleaning up their web presence to better distinguish themselves from predatory publications, I have developed a handy checklist for editorial offices to tidy up their practices, take steps towards greater transparency, and put some distance between themselves and the predatory journals that are targeting their least-suspecting authors (Table 2). The checklist has not been properly validated and is published here to simply get the ball rolling. It seems likely an even more comprehensive checklist is needed for every editorial office to use. What also needs to follow is a collective effort across all journal publishing to define minimum standards journals need to meet in providing full and transparent information on both a journal’s identity and its application of peer review.

So, in conclusion, there is a direct interest for editorial offices in the results of this study that attempted to better define the shared characteristics of presumed predatory journals. As a community, we need to lead the way in improving our own web presence by ensuring it is error free and full of essential information.

Table 2. Peer-Review Transparency Checklist.

	Action Item	Notes with Reference to Shamseer et al 2017
<input type="checkbox"/>	Check journal homepage and Instructions for Authors are both free of spelling errors and colloquialisms.	65% of surveyed predatory journals had problems with grammar and syntax.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Check that any images/logos are high resolution, actually need to be included, and are properly authorized for use on your homepage.	63% of predatory journals had a website that contained distorted/unauthorized images.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Clearly identify your Editor-in-Chief and Editorial Board members. Include information on the institution where they work.	24% of predatory journals failed to identify the Editor-in-Chief. 35% of predatory journals failed to identify an Editorial Board and/or team of Associate Editors. 44% of predatory journals that named an Editor-in-Chief failed to identify the institutional affiliation for the Editor-in-Chief.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ensure the journal owner (e.g., society) and publisher are clearly identified.	47% of predatory journals did not identify this information. Only 32% of predatory journals provided the URL of their publisher. However 13% of legitimate open access journals also failed to provide a link.
<input type="checkbox"/>	State your manuscript handling process.	43% of predatory journals provided no information on their peer-review process. However, 14% of traditional subscription journals also failed to describe how their peer review was managed.
<input type="checkbox"/>	If you use COPE to guide your response to publication ethics, state this support for COPE.	Only 13% of predatory journals mention COPE.
<input type="checkbox"/>	State if you actively support ORCID or use iThenticate, Crossref, Crossmark.	Just 1% of predatory journals mentioned iThenticate.
<input type="checkbox"/>	If you mandate some form of study registration prior to submission (e.g., www.clinicaltrials.gov for randomized controlled trials), make sure that is clearly stated.	Only 6% of predatory journals mention pre-registration.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Consider using an email address that uses your journal/society/publisher name, rather than @gmail.com and @yahoo.com .	63% of predatory journals used a generic address compared to 9% for legitimate open access journals and 5% of traditional subscription journals.
<input type="checkbox"/>	For open access journals, ensure you are listed in the DOAJ and mention that fact on your homepage.	34% of legitimate open access journals did not reference DOAJ.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Provide your journal ISSN.	28% of traditional subscription journals failed to mention their ISSN.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Mention your policy for the digital preservation of content.	Just 6% of predatory journals mentioned digital preservation. The veracity of such claims were not tested, however, in the study by Shamseer and colleagues.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Disclose who retains copyright.	20% of predatory journals did not mention anything about copyright.

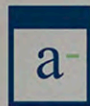
In doing so, we will likely make our peer-review processes more transparent. And such transparency will reveal a legitimate effort to evaluate a paper. It will simply be too hard for predatory journals to maintain they adhere to such standards and then claim they can publish a paper inside a week. The burden of proof for legitimacy needs to be high, and we need to make sure we are meeting such standards before casting stones at the predatory journals.

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