

Swimming Against the Tide: The Ethical Way Forward of Dealing with Predatory Journals



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It is by now a somewhat worn statement in the publishing industry to say that not only is open access (OA) publishing important, but it is here to stay.* The time for debating its merits and its future is past,[†] and major and minor publishing houses alike have all adopted some type of OA policy. The Internet, recently crowned as the most important development of the last 40 years in scholarly communication,¹ made OA possible and not to be outdone, OA in turn provided fertile ground for a variety of new developments and services.² Less favourable of these developments are, of course, the questionable OA publishing practices which have arisen (often referred to as 'predatory' or 'deceptive' OA publishing),³

which this essay will reflect on to discuss the ethical way forward when it comes to dealing with journals deemed to be questionable OA journals.

But first, some context. I work in the Editorial division of the Taylor & Francis Africa office in South Africa,[‡] and part of my responsibilities entails visiting university and research institution libraries for author workshops on how to get published, understanding OA, and distinguishing between legitimate and questionable OA. I shall assume that whoever is reading this essay is apprised with the tenets of this discussion, which play themselves out with incremental variation every few months on forums like *Scholarly Kitchen*⁴: what is 'predatory' about questionable OA publishing⁵; on the difficulty of settling on neutral terminology in discussing this aspect of OA⁶; about Beall's List and the legacy of that approach⁷; on how questionable OA mostly affects scholars in developing countries in the Global South and how this speaks to the lack of resources as a probable cause⁸; on debates on the problematic nature of blacklists⁹; on whether whitelists are any better given that they are unlikely to ever be complete; and of the now increasingly favoured (at least by the publishing industry) approaches such as *Think. Check. Submit.* and the Journal Publishing Practices and Standards (JPPS) framework.¹⁰ This is well-covered terrain, and I will not re-evaluate its arguments but will focus instead on why I believe *Think. Check. Submit.* particularly is moving us in the right direction in how to address this problem ethically, more so than any of the other approaches previously and currently available.

The ethical way forward of dealing with predatory journals, I believe, is to focus on author education and raising awareness. Educating authors about ethical academic publishing practices, specifically around OA in general, and legitimate OA in particular, provides a framework which researchers can build on to independently exercise their powers of discrimination in choosing the appropriate journals to submit to. Like US Congresswoman Maxine Waters,

* However, there will always be those like Joseph Esposito to argue that "OA is a bad idea whose time has come." See concluding paragraph in "Evaluating Open Access Programs," posted on the *Scholarly Kitchen* blog on February 15, 2018 (<https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/02/15/evaluating-open-access-programs/>; accessed May 28, 2018).

† For example, in 2016 SPARC (the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition) Europe, a not-for-profit member organization promoting open science, noted that "[we] decided not to further update The Open Access Citation Advantage Service since the citation advantage evidence has now become far more common knowledge to our authors." (<https://sparceurope.org/what-we-do/open-access/sparc-europe-open-access-resources/open-access-citation-advantage-service-oaca/>; accessed May 30, 2018).

‡ For an outline of the Taylor & Francis Africa programme see: <http://taylorandfrancis.com/contact/global-offices/africa/>.

we need to reclaim our time. The publishing industry, and all those concerned with the scholarly publishing cycle, need to spend less time unpacking questionable publishing practices and instead re-orientate themselves toward promoting awareness around what ethical publishing practices should or could look like in this fast-changing age of OA publishing. Think. Check. Submit. provides a good basis for author education into legitimate publishing and is a foundation around which more complex discussions on legitimate OA publishing can develop.

However, at the author workshops I facilitate throughout the year (10 in 2017) I inevitably meet very frustrated scholars and librarians who feel Think. Check. Submit. is not helpful enough, given that it provides no definitive answers in the manner of blacklists or whitelists. Often the argument is that younger scholars just starting out in academia who have limited knowledge of the publishing landscape and no support from senior academics in navigating its complexities, are unable to use such a guide when they have no experience in what a legitimate journal should look like. My response to this and similarly developed objections is always the same, and it is twofold. It is also the crux of my suggestion of the way forward. First, for a scholar in any field of research, a skill that must be sharply developed is that of discrimination and critical thinking, the ability to make fine distinctions required of one testing and applying the Think. Check. Submit. guidelines. Secondly, scholars must seek to be in dialogue with their peers and therefore, before publishing, they need to invest time in knowing where their scholarly community discusses the latest developments in their field, both locally and internationally. Lack of discrimination in a scholar, and lack of knowledge of fora where peers are developing their ideas in dialogue with other peers, is a sign of troubled scholarship. In such a context, the proliferation of OA publishing scams can be attributed to lack of resources for sure, but of subsidiary concern is what might also be lax standards of scholarly rigour.

Scholarly traditions the world over place a high value on scholars precisely for their developed ability to make fine distinctions. For example, in the Islamic tradition, Anas bin Maalik narrates that the Prophet Muhammad said, 'Indeed, the example of the *ulama* [real scholar] is like that of stars in the sky, by which guidance is obtained in the darkness of the land and water....' Although the reference here was specifically to scholars of the Qur'an, the principle of faith vested in people exerting themselves in pursuit of deep knowledge can be applied to the realm of secular scholarship. If scholars cannot tell that an avenue of publishing is inappropriate for their work—in that it puts them in dialogue with no one of

significance in their field, starting with the absence of meaningful peer review (two rather broad distinctions to make)—it is difficult to imagine how legitimate publishers are to rescue such a situation by their sole efforts.

I do not want to be thought of as rubbishing the claim that lack of resources in certain parts of the world provide fertile ground for scam operations to take root given that researchers at under-resourced institutions without access to academic work might not know what is and isn't a legitimate publishing journal. Indeed, I believe this is the reason why publishers, big and small, need to join hands with organisations such as Publishers for Development, Research4Life, and INASP, whose access initiatives ensure that legitimate scholarship is readily available and easily accessible to such institutions. Furthermore, publishers should support, through funding and other viable means, the work of international organisations like AuthorAID (e.g., with workshops¹¹) and local ones like the AMLA Network¹² that have direct access to researchers and provide workshops that disseminate knowledge on ethical publishing practices even in under-resourced regions. These workshops assist with overcoming the difficulties of getting published in legitimate journals while hopefully not underplaying the reality of that difficulty—the competitive nature thereof due to lack of space for the sheer volume of academic output. Authors must have a realistic expectation of the publication process; how lengthy the waiting period can sometimes get, for example, to discourage the turn to the get-published-quick alternative offered by most questionable OA publishers. Even senior academics need to be properly informed about OA given that it is a relatively new development, and they are also prone to fall victim to some of these questionable OA publishing schemes.

To say that debates on questionable OA in South Africa revolve around blacklists would be to underemphasise the matter¹³; scholars, research officers, librarians, funders, science bodies, and government are all obsessed with them. Blacklists have emerged as the leading mechanism of dealing with this problem and attention to this approach is on the rise. By my view suggested above, this is a concerning approach. Attention to questionable journals should as far as possible be restricted to within the broader context of discussing what publishing in legitimate OA journals entails and the value-add of quality editorial processes,¹⁴ and never as sole focus of discussion. It must always be a point of contrast, discussed enough for researchers to be aware of it as one of the reasons for exercising caution when choosing where to publish, but never emphasised so much that it dominates discussions pertaining to OA or is the main topic of

discussion surrounding scholarly output. Otherwise, as we say in my language, *singaphela bazala* (we would be done for [busying ourselves with this matter], colleagues!). The publishing industry must instead exhaust itself with finding ways of incorporating the best of the latest technological innovations into the ecosystem of ethical publishing, and not with stemming the rising tide of the scam operations. To maintain the prestige of journals in the Global South often plagued with being misconstrued as predatory, focus should rather be on applying the JPPS framework, and not on creating more blacklists. Scholars need to come to the forefront, take on the mantle of responsibility towards their fields, and work with legitimate publishers and organisations supporting the work of such publishers, to reduce the spread of questionable publishing and preserve the scholarly record. It is time for all hands, and not just those of legitimate publishers, to be firmly on deck for the ship to make it through the questionable OA publishing current.

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