

The Scourge of Illegitimate Journals: Becoming Better Informed in a Post-Beall Era



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In January 2017, one of the most (in)famous sites in publishing suddenly went dark. I am talking about Jeffrey Beall's eponymous List of predatory journals and publishers that was to be found at www.scholarlyoa.com. Beall's List is likely known to most of us, but for the uninitiated, it came to represent a quasi-definitive list of highly problematic journals. These are journals that flooded inboxes with requests for papers.¹ Journals that promised rapid peer review and cheap publication yet fail to actually perform a review or properly produce an article to ensure it has a persistent link and is properly archived. Journals that allegedly fake the names of editors, stole identities to plump their editorial boards, and tricked others into believing they had lent their name to a credible publication. The emerging situation has proven disheartening for some (a short list of pieces on the disappearance of Beall's List can be found at the end of this article). Potentially predatory publishers, on the other hand, likely greeted the news of Beall's disappearance with unbridled joy. If not exactly rejoicing, another, very distinct, group are probably quietly relieved as well: Beall critics. Beall was accumulating a growing legion of detractors regarding his rather opaque methods used to develop the List. Furthermore, concern was also raised about the implication of being on the List with its "predatory" appellation which connoted deceit and nefariousness, when in fact some journals were perhaps guilty of nothing more than guilelessness and/or incompetence and may have otherwise been on a path toward legitimate publication. So, if anyone is hoping to read a Chicken Little-esque article on what will happen to the world now that Beall has gone dark (and remains so at the time of publishing) you can

stop reading here. Instead, I ask that we think carefully about what Beall (the man and the List) achieved and where we go from here. I also make a plea in this article for any future endeavors that aim to replace Beall to include every stakeholder in the publishing process.

Make no mistake: What we commonly understand to be predatory journals are an appalling parasitic blot on the publishing landscape. "They exploit the unwitting" goes the common, and most vocal, narrative. They pollute the publishing landscape by allowing non peer-reviewed research to bubble up and get cited, with potential risks of misdirecting future research, misplacing significance, and maybe, downstream, influencing patient treatment approaches when it comes to biomedical journals. But can we precisely define what "they" actually represents? We think we can. But can we? Honestly? Over the last couple of years, I have been involved with a multi-center research project led by the Centre for Journalology at the Ottawa Hospital Research Institute. At about the time this issue of *EON* will publish, the fruits of this work will be available for all to see: The first, systematic study on the characteristics of so-called predatory journals as compared to a sample of legitimate open access and "traditional", subscription-based, journals.² Those results will be summarized in a future issue of *EON* but, in short, the results challenged many of my own personal assumptions about predatory journals. Not least is the term predatory itself. The word is perfect for grabbing attention but may be somewhat excessive with the potential for some innocent parties becoming swept up by a broad brush. The problem is that across publishing, there is no definition of what actually constitutes "predatory" publication. That situation was not helped by Beall himself. His inclusion methods were never made completely clear and, really until the Ottawa study, have barely been subjected to any systematic vetting. The upcoming Ottawa article will not provide definitive criteria for what constitutes predatory publications, but will instead point out common characteristics across these publications. Inevitably, the more you look, the more troubling the definitions used to date become. And

for that specific reason, I am not particularly sad Beall's List is now dark.*

Note that big asterisk, however. I think Beall's List served an incredibly important, if sometimes misdirected, function, and the vacuum left is now potentially troubling unless the publishing industry and the research community get smart quickly. I had the great fortune to meet Jeffrey Beall at the ISMTE conference in Baltimore in the summer of 2015. He was standing alone holding a beer; he was possibly one of the most well-known people in the publishing world at that time, and no one was talking to him. I approached him and promptly spent the next hour talking to a very humble, self-effacing, erudite man. I truly admire what he has done and the fact that he was brave enough to do it with all the potential for nastiness and legal battles. I was also struck by the fact that he was very candid. I do not claim to know Jeffrey Beall and absolutely will not be presumptuous enough in this article to speculate about his motivations for walking away from his curated List, as I found some have done in blogs, articles, and social media. However, it was very evident to me that I was talking to someone who had a brilliant idea to shine a light on the most murky corner of publishing but had now found the List—how people used it and how various agendas were being pushed because of it—maybe a little overwhelming. Was Beall blameless in all this happening? Arguably not. But that is another conversation for another time.

Certainly, as an outside observer, it felt to me that Beall's List, and all the conversations it generated, had gone way beyond its intent and original purpose. On the one hand, the List was being used by some as a tool to label and accuse. On the other, it was being used as a crutch to protect many from being duped. It was, if we are brutally honest, a blunt instrument when a scalpel was needed to cut out the cancer inside the body of the official published scientific and academic record that such duplicitous publications had come to represent. Amazingly, from just this one list, many debates arose. Beall's List was focused on journals and publishers, but the List itself did not really address why people were publishing in these journals. That discussion is critical: Were authors being duped? Alternatively, did authors possess adroitness to recognize that if mainstream journals could not/would not publish their research, they could find an outlet in the modern day equivalent of vanity publishing? Authors could be fraudsters too and, in the absence of any discernible peer-review process and perhaps in perfect symbiosis, the illegitimate journal market grew to mutually serve each party in a race to the

bottom. Then again, is this also a convenient, and assuring, conceit? That all research in so-called predatory journals was tainted in some way but, reassuringly for many, contained within a silo (defined by Beall) of the discredited. Research will be published this year (currently embargoed, so I cannot disclose any information) that showed rather than Beall's List journals being a repository of the corrupt, inept, and rejected, they also published a lot of perfectly good studies. Okay, so that covers corrupt publishers and authors, both the good and the bad. What also about the entire open access pricing model that many contend possibly led to the sprouting of predatory journals? Was that model, with article processing charges often over \$2,000 in many journals, shutting out a huge number of the world's researchers? Did a number of these journals, either corrupt or inept, cater to the disenfranchised, and what did it mean for a journal that found itself on Beall's List? Was there/is there a path towards legitimacy? And there is yet another conversation topic: Was there substance to possible claims that the List contained a whiff of neo-colonialism or Western paternalism, whether intended or not? After that far-from exhaustive digest I just presented of ongoing conversations surrounding predatory publishing, it is easy to see how Beall's straightforward idea of pointing a finger at what ostensibly seemed to be the publishing equivalent of a bad hombre, spiraled out of control and spun away from its originator.

And herein lies my concern for what now follows. More than anything, I am concerned that someone—or some entity—will simply jump in and fill the space without paying attention to the fact that their inclusion criteria need to be scientifically tested and subjected to the highest standards of methodological review. As Beall never published his criteria, his methods were impossible to validate. Any future list also probably should not be a blacklist, but maybe a white list. It may be something that, through the provision of clear criteria for good practice, could be used both by emerging journals as a guide and for existing legitimate journals to sharpen up their own performance before looking down their noses at others. Any future replacement for Beall's List also needs to be multi-functional. It needs to be able to incentivize good practice. It needs to be used as a tool for education. It should be adaptable. On this particular point, I would love to see it feed a future system all journals could tap into, to detect whether a citation is from a journal that does not demonstrate some common core criteria for acceptable practice (the tool only detects and provides

no judgment; journals can simply choose whether to accept the citation or not once it is highlighted). Above all, a future List absolutely needs to be utterly transparent, smart enough to evolve and even learn from itself. It needs to be supported by publishers and researchers alike. It needs to be built upon proper, published, research and not just simple consensus on what we think is the proper way journals (and researchers who publish in them) should behave. Anything less, simply put, becomes Beall 1.1 rather than a paradigm-shifting version 2.0.

Anyway, for one final, brief, moment: back to Beall. Gradually, Beall's List was being subjected to ever-greater scrutiny and, quite frankly, its position, as the unofficial arbiter of legitimacy, was increasingly untenable. Beall's List represented a fantastic version 1.0, but it was on the cusp of outliving its usefulness. Maybe Jeffrey Beall felt the same way (sorry, I said I would not speculate!). Whether he was right or wrong or, most likely, somewhere in between, Beall has performed an amazingly useful service to both publishing and academia. But it is time to get more sophisticated. It's also time we get both more serious and smarter in discussing what to do with illegitimate publications and illegitimate research. This is a multi-stakeholder conversation that concerns all of the following: the research community (both researchers and their institutions alike), funding agencies, and publishers/society journal owners who should be motivated because they are potentially losing revenues. Shen and Bjork, for example, contend that the predatory journal market in 2014 was worth US\$74,000,000.³ If we eventually accept, when the forthcoming study I alluded to earlier shows as such, that some of these revenues were generated off the back of good research, publishers may realize income is being siphoned away from them.

Finally, if you read *EON* you are more likely than not working in an editorial office. You might be wondering: Why should I care, particularly if your journal is utterly respectable. Here is your answer: You most likely serve a particular niche market of authors, especially so if you are a society journal (*i.e.*, the *Annals of the International Society of X*, the *Journal of the American XYZ Society*, etc.) Many of your authors are working in the dark with no instruction on how to get published, how to properly write for publication, or how to properly cite papers to effectively contextualize their research. Many of you, like me, go to great lengths to make your journal(s) become a knowledge source on all matters publishing. In doing so,

you give a little back to the authors that give you their research to publish. Your journal in return might benefit from any sense of trust or community that you may foster. So go ahead and think about how you might educate your authors on so-called predatory publishing. You could write an editorial. I did this recently and still get emails from readers thanking me for pointing out a phenomenon they were not aware of.⁴ A second reason why you should care is that you might want to audit your practices, your instructions for authors, your peer-review processes, and then determine whether you are complete/up-to-date with the latest good practices (such as they are, scattered across a multitude of documents and organizations). Take a good look at what you are doing. Seriously. The Ottawa study, just in our small sample, found some otherwise perfectly legitimate publications displaying behaviors that were scarcely different from so-called predatory, or potentially predatory, journals. Finally, use this moment to talk to your editors about what protections you might need in the future to ensure the corpus of research you publish does not become infiltrated by citations to publications that cannot be verified for their legitimacy because they published in potentially illegitimate journals. That might be a discussion for the Editorial Board or a publications committee. That doesn't mean you shouldn't initiate the conversation.

So, for now, Beall's List is gone. Something may follow soon. If it does, it better meet some high standards or otherwise expect withering criticism from an increasingly alert research community. Let's all use this pause to think about what each of us can do to contribute to the conversation and uphold the qualities of good peer review and the proper publication of expertly validated research.

If you wish to know more about the fate of Beall's List, here you will find an assortment of further reading:

www.timeshighereducation.com/news/bealls-list-closure-boon-predatory-publishers

theconversation.com/who-will-keep-predatory-science-journals-at-bay-now-that-jeffrey-bealls-blog-is-gone-71613

www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/01/18/librarians-list-predatory-journals-reportedly-removed-due-threats-and-politics

retractionwatch.com/2017/01/17/bealls-list-potential-predatory-publishers-go-dark/

*Please note: All opinions represent my own and do not necessarily represent the opinions of Origin Editorial, ISMTE, or any journals I am personally associated with. In the interest of full disclosure, my spouse, Larissa Shamseer, is involved

in research into illegitimate publication. Again, however, the views expressed here are mine and mine alone.

References:

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- 2 Shamseer L., Moher D., Maduekwe O., et al. Potential predatory and legitimate biomedical journals: can you tell the difference? A cross-sectional comparison. 2017; DOI 10.1186/s12916-017-0785-9 (in press).
3. Shen C., Bjork B.C. "Predatory" open access: A longitudinal study of article volumes and market characteristics. BMC Med. 2015;13:230.
4. Roberts, J. Predatory Journals: think before you submit. Headache: The Journal of Head and Face Pain. 56:618-621.

