

# PREDATORY JOURNALS: A GLOBAL THREAT TO THE SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING LANDSCAPE

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There has been a major trend in academic publishing from traditional print publication to open access journals and online publication in recent times. The authors now find more avenues to publish their work than before, but at the same time they are vulnerable to become prey to predatory journals. The term "Predatory Journals" was first coined by Jeffrey Beall<sup>1</sup>, Associate Professor and librarian at the university of Colorado Denver. According to Beall predatory publisher is one "who publishes counterfeit journals to exploit the open access model in which the author pays." The most recent clear, comprehensive and consensus definition of predatory journal was formulated in April 2019 in Ottawa, Canada by 43 researchers belonging to 10 different countries<sup>2</sup>. Their definition reads "Predatory journals and publishers are entities that prioritize self interest at the expense of scholarship and are characterized by false or misleading information, deviation from best editorial and publication practices, a lack of transparency, and/or the use of aggressive and indiscriminate solicitation practices". Alternative terms for predatory journals are "Dark Journals,"<sup>2</sup> "Illegitimate Journals"<sup>3,4</sup> "Deceptive Journals"<sup>5</sup> "Pseudo Journals"<sup>6</sup> and "Journals Operating in Bad Faith"<sup>7</sup>. Predatory journals are extremely damaging to the scientific community and has rightly been termed "Global Threat to the Scholarly Publishing Landscape."<sup>8,9</sup> These journals are more frequently found in biomedical research and particularly in low income developing countries<sup>10,11</sup>. The exact number of predatory journals is unknown but it has been estimated that currently there are 8000 predatory journals. The volume of articles in these predatory journals has increased from 53000 in 2010 to 420000 in 2014 and majority of articles are submitted from Asia and Africa. These predatory journals usually publish articles within 2 to 3 months after submission and authors are charged on an average 178 US

dollars as article processing charges (APC)<sup>12</sup>. Authors from India, Nigeria and Pakistan have been found to submit articles to predatory journals more frequently than authors from other countries<sup>13</sup>. Shen and Bjork<sup>12</sup> calculated country wise ratio of articles submitted to predatory journals and Web of Science indexed journals and found that the ratio was 1580% in Nigeria, 277% in India, 70% in Iran and 6% in USA.

As an example when we searched for predatory journals in Orthopaedics subspecialty we were surprised because the number of predatory Orthopaedic journals was three times greater than the legitimate indexed journals. We found 104 suspected predatory publishers and 225 possible predatory Orthopaedic journals while the number of legitimate Orthopaedic journals indexed in Thomson Reuters InCites Journal Citation Reports is 82<sup>14</sup>.

It is very important, yet increasingly difficult to distinguish a predatory journal from a legitimate journal because of the tremendous proliferation of both legitimate and predatory journals<sup>7</sup>. Currently there are more than 90 checklists available to identify predatory journals<sup>8</sup>. Beall<sup>15</sup> published a list of 1155 predatory publishers and 1294 predatory journal in January 2017. His criteria<sup>16</sup> was based upon 48 items formulated in accordance with the policy statements of Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) Code of Conduct for Journal Publisher<sup>17</sup> and Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing<sup>18</sup> from World Association of Medical Editor (WAME), Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and Open Access Publishers Association (OASPA). Although Beall's list proved to be a very useful tool for assessing credibility of journals, he was severely criticized by many authors, journals and publishers. Ultimately he removed the list of predatory journals from his blog after

he received legal threats and being pressurized by his employer, the university of Colorado<sup>19</sup>. After removal of Beall's list, Cabell international launched a subscription based blacklist of predatory journal in June 2017. This list contained 12314 predatory journals belonging to different academic fields in October 2019<sup>20,21</sup>. The coalition of scholarly publishing organization has formulated a checklist, "Think, Check, Submit" which can guide the authors to submit their research to a legitimate journal<sup>22</sup>. Shamsheer<sup>23</sup> proposed 13 evidence based characteristics to differentiate a predatory medical journal from a legitimate journal (Table 1).

Majority of the predatory journals are not indexed in various reputed scientific indexing databases like PubMed or Medline nor they are enlisted in Journal Citation Report (JCR), Scopus or Web of Science. They lack genuine and transparent peer review, licensing, quality control and content preservation<sup>24</sup>. These journals usually claim to have impact factor (IF) or rating index but that is not the genuine IF allocated by Institute of Scientific Information (Thomson Reuter) rather altered and false (i.e. Journal IF, Real IF, Prognosis IF, Unofficial IF). The publishers of these journals always adopt very aggressive marketing campaign through numerous frequent emails to potential authors requesting for submission of manuscripts, offering editorial and peer reviewer positions in return. The language of these emails are flattering and often praise the author's previous published work to encourage submission of manuscript. In most of these invitations, the postal address of the publisher or journal office is not mentioned or unsearchable. To attract authors, predatory journals often impersonate some famous and well known journals ("Hijacking") or steal the identity of those indexed journals which do not have their own website<sup>25</sup>. An interesting and atypical case is that of Experimental & Clinical Cardiology which was an indexed journal with an impact factor of 0.7 (JCR). It was purchased by a predatory journal Cardiology Academic Press in 2013. The publisher profited by increasing article processing charges to 1200 US dollar and increasing the number of articles from 63 in 2013 to more than 1000 articles in 2014<sup>26</sup>.

Predatory journals have fake and unverified editorial board. Sorokowski<sup>27</sup>, head of the Institute of Psychology at the University of Wroclaw, Poland conducted an interesting 'sting operation' by submitting 120 applications on behalf of a fake scientist Anna O. Szust to various journals wishing to serve in their editorial board. He created fake accounts of Anna O. Szust in google, twitter and Academia.edu and made her fake faculty webpage at the Institute of Philosophy at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan. Sorokowski received positive but conditional response from 40 journals listed in Bealls list,<sup>8</sup> journals of DOAJ category and no reply from Journal Citation Report (JCR) category. Their demands were

either payment of subscription fee or donation (ranging from 50 to 750 US dollars), submission of one or two article to the journal or organizing a conference with subsequent publication of presenters papers in their journal. Although Sorokowski informed the journals about the fraud later on and requested to withdraw the name of Anna O. Szust, her name still appears on 11 journal's website as member editorial board, one journal's website as editor and a member of advisory board of the journals of Open Access Indexing Agency. Legitimate journals regularly spend substantial amount of money on editorial staff, peer reviewers and quality assurance, predatory journals, on the other hand, omit all these services to gain financial profit in the form of APC from authors. They have higher manuscript acceptance rate and almost negligible rejection rates. The submitting authors are not informed about peer reviewers or editorial comments<sup>28</sup>. Manuscripts are rarely sent to authors for revision. The scientific quality of research articles is doubtful and even harmful to the patients<sup>7</sup>. The main clientele of predatory journals are young inexperienced early carrier researchers eager to publish quickly<sup>29</sup>. Predatory journals are instrumental in promoting pseudo-researchers to higher ranks in countries where promotions are still based on number of publications only and not on critical evaluation of published articles or journals<sup>30</sup>. The primary aim of publishers producing predatory journals is to extract money from authors. Predatory journals can only be countered with constant and adaptable efforts. Submission to these journals can be reduced if early carrier researchers and authors are educated and mentored to differentiate between a legitimate and a predatory journal. The "Publish or Perish" policy must be discouraged<sup>28</sup>. Awareness campaigns against predatory journals must be accelerated. Data base registration and indexing agencies must tighten their inclusion criteria, web security and check lists to prevent illegal penetration by predatory journals. The universities and institutions must abandon their criteria of large number of articles for hiring and promoting their faculty. Since predatory publishers are predominantly targeting the developing countries through their attractive low article processing charges, high quality reputable impact factor journals must waive the article processing charges for authors belonging to developing countries.

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**Table 1: Shamsheer’s 13 Characteristics of potential predatory Journals**

S.No.	Description
1	The scope of interest includes non-biomedical subjects alongside biomedical topics.
2	The website contains spelling and grammar errors.
3	The 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	Manuscript 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., < 150 USD).
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).

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