The Scholarly Kitchen

AUTHORS, BUSINESS MODELS, CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS, ETHICS, PEER REVIEW, RESEARCH

“Predatory” Open Access Publishers — The Natural Extreme of an Author-Pays Model

POSTED BY KENT ANDERSON · MAR 6, 2012 · 30 COMMENTS
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Image via Wikipedia

A recent story in the Chronicle of Higher Education covers a phenomenon all of us have suspected, mainly because we've seen it via our editorial boards and editorial advisors — the proliferation of open access (OA) publishers with new names, unknown pedigrees, big promises, and fulsome editorial boards, which often spam our editors and advisors with offers to join the parade.

The article, entitled “Predatory Online Journals Lure Scholars Who Are Eager to Publish,” isn't quite focused enough in its headline. It's not online journals that are the problem. The model that is potentially predatory is author-pays OA, and those who are preying on unsuspecting academics are new and often sketchy publishers who seem to provide little more than the appearance of expediency and a whiff of rigor.

Problems outlined among the predatory journals include:

- Articles published without complete author approval.
- Articles published before payment terms were either understood or completed.
- Articles published with payment terms incomplete but then negotiated, forcing authors into an uncomfortable position.
- An editorial process that created more problems than it solved, with errors introduced during proof-reading, and authors “tearing their hair out” because of it.
- Papers published without peer-review.

Proving the maxim “sometimes even a blind squirrel finds a nut,” at least one of the journals described in this article published a useful report. However, such events seem to be aberrations, and not the result of careful peer-review, editorial, or quality control practices, much less brand-building and audience affinity.

The definition of “predatory open access publishers” offered by Jeffrey Beall, who is quoted in the Chronicle article:

...are those that unprofessionally exploit the author-pays model of open-access publishing (Gold OA) for their own profit. Typically, these publishers spam professional email lists, broadly soliciting article submissions for the clear purpose of gaining additional income. Operating essentially as vanity presses, these publishers typically have a low article acceptance threshold, with a false-front or non-existent peer review process. Unlike professional publishing operations, whether subscription-based or ethically-sound open access, these predatory publishers add little value to scholarship, pay little attention to digital preservation, and operate using fly-by-night, unsustainable business models.

Every business model has its logical extremes. As Sherlock Holmes once said:

From a drop of water, a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other.

From an author-pays model, you can infer some people will take it too far — just as from a reader-pays model, you can infer high prices and consolidation (and, from a sponsored content model, you can infer Elsevier’s fake journals scandal). The questions will revolve about how far is too far, who determines these things, and how do we sort out disagreements.

Just as extremes are indicative of the weaknesses inherent to each model, they are not indictments. However, I do believe that the weaknesses of the subscription model and the advertising/sponsorship model are fairly well-known and monitored. We’re just now learning of the natural weaknesses of the author-pays model, and they are hard to monitor, partly because author-pays OA gets a bit of a free pass these days.
Until we understand and take stances relative to the extremes of all models, including author-pays OA, we won't be doing all we can to improve and protect the scholarly record.

About Kent Anderson

I am the CEO/Publisher of the Journal of Bone & Joint Surgery, Inc. Prior to this, I was an executive at the New England Journal of Medicine. I also was Director of Medical Journals at the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Discussion

30 Responses to ““Predatory” Open Access Publishers — The Natural Extreme of an Author-Pays Model”

1. Here’s where author-pays is more open and transparent.

   If a given Gold OA publisher is predatory (and this is not difficult to discover, in part thanks to Jeffrey Beall’s list), then authors can simply not deal with them, and no money is spent.

   But when a subscription publisher is predatory, there is nothing an author can directly do about it: if relevant articles are published there, then his library simply has to subscribe and that’s an end of it. (And of course thanks to the Big Deal, money is often also spent on IRrelevant articles, but that is a side-issue.)

   It’s a matter of granularity. I’d no more use a predatory Gold OA publisher than I’d have my car serviced by a predatory garage; I’m sure you wouldn’t, either.

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POSTED BY MIKE TAYLOR | MAR 6, 2012, 5:45 AM

- Readers uncover useless subscription publishers. This is why usage and other factors are brought to bear on purchasing decisions by institutions, and individual readers make subscription decision, too. If there’s nothing worth reading, . . .

   As for bundles, those are optional. If an institution doesn’t want the bundle, they don’t have to take it. Also, author-pays journals do their own version of “bundling” — institutional fees that discount future OA fees.

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“Predatory” Open Access Publishers — The Natural Extreme of an Author...

POSTED BY KENT ANDERSON | MAR 6, 2012, 8:08 AM

- Readers uncover useless subscription publishers. This is why usage and other factors are brought to bear on purchasing decisions by institutions.

Yes — eventually. But as you know, subscriptions are typically renewed on a three-to-five-year cycle. Whereas the decision to publish or not with a given Gold-OA venue can be taken just as soon as the author chooses. And it’s a decision that an individual can take rather than having to persuade a group of librarians. Like I said, it’s a matter of granularity.

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POSTED BY MIKE TAYLOR | MAR 6, 2012, 8:11 AM

- Granularity is also another aspect of predation. Predators pick off animals one at a time. Herds are harder to predate — librarians work as a community and often talk with one another, compare notes, etc. This story is partly about how unsuspecting authors and editors are duped individually (granularly) into submitting to or serving these journals. So granularity is an aspect of author-pays OA, but one that the predators have used to their advantage. It leads to a lack of coordinated knowledge. And it takes a librarian like Beall to start putting the pieces together. Individual authors and individual editors are confused by all these solicitations and options. They are spammed as individuals, very granular.

As for the comment that subscriptions are typically renewed on a 3-5 year cycle, that’s not true outside a few deals. Annual subscriptions and licenses are much more common.

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POSTED BY KENT ANDERSON | MAR 6, 2012, 8:43 AM

- Granularity is also another aspect of predation. Predators pick off animals one at a time. Herds are harder to predate — librarians work as a community and often talk with one another, compare notes, etc.

That’s true. Nevertheless, I prefer being in the position of making my own choices about the access-vs.price trade-off, guided as necessary by the expertise of people like Jeffrey Beall and my peers.

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POSTED BY MIKE TAYLOR | MAR 6, 2012, 8:57 AM

- The bottom line is that, using all relevant knowledge, I am in a position to make my own choices about what I spend on publishing. But I am not in any position to make such choices about what I (through my university library) spend on reading. Because of group purchasing decisions, Bristol doesn’t have access to Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London, which I need, though it does to many other Wiley journals which I don’t. My money is being spent on (for me) the wrong Wiley journals, and there is nothing I can do about that. But I can choose which journals I publish in. So by paying at that end of the transaction, I have more control.

(No one of that is meant to imply that Gold OA is without problems, of course. Just that, taking them all together, it’s
2. However, one needs to consider the very real possibility that we are transitioning to an author pays system of high acceptance and minimal review. Journals may compete for manuscripts, not subscriptions, in entirely new ways, including ways that are distasteful to the present system. The differences between a subscription business and an author pays business are vast, far greater than people seem to realize.

It is really up to the distributed community where we go from here. The revolution may fail or it may succeed, but one thing is certain. There is going to be a lot of confusion. Confusion is the hallmark of revolution, so people should plan for it.

David, you are correct both in the dangers of this model and that it is vastly different.

The model changes the relationship among authors, publishers and readers transferring the role of funding the publication from university libraries, to the authors or potential their funders or employers. It adds a new dimension to author’s decisions as to where to publish their manuscripts which of course changes how publisher market their services as well as significantly reducing the role of librarians.

The model has opened a market for sleazy and/or incompetent publishers that have been popping up like mushrooms. That’s why I don’t think Beall’s approach of listing them has much value, there is no way to keep up so what is the use?

As I said below the real solution is setting standards and certifying honest legitimate publishers who actually know what they are doing. There needs to be a range of journals offering a variety of services and levels of peer review but all following basic good publishing practices marketing their services in a fair an open way and avoiding such practices as wholesale spamming of potential authors, editors and reviewers. If funders start insisting on this, the sleazy publishers will dry up. If authors want to vanity publish with their own money so be it. It won’t get them far professionally.

This is a very new model and still has a lot of kinks to work out. Dealing with the sleaze balls and incompetent publishers is one problem. Developing a more workable system for funding allows authors with manuscripts worth publishing to get funding to do it rather than the very uneven system that exists. There also needs to be incentives to keep article processing
charges reasonable. It won’t work any better than the serial crisis in the subscription model if funders pay what ever publishers charge whether it is reasonable or not.

The model does provide the potential to fund quality publishing while providing open access which in my view has a lot of value. It also makes what is being purchased more transparent.

FYI, Bo-Christer Björk and I reviewed the article processing charge (APC) policies of over a 1,300 of these journals listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals. The article is in press but the preprint is available here:

http://www.openaccesspublishing.org/apc2/

Our goal wasn’t to sort out the good and bad but only describe the charges and types of publishers.

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POSTED BY DAVID SOLOMON | MAR 7, 2012, 10:55 AM

3. The discussion above may be missing my point. My read is that Gold OA has become golden. That is, people think there is money to be made so we are seeing the beginning of an investment bubble. I myself have been thinking maybe I should start an AP (author pays) journal or two, using my research on emerging fields. AP has some tremendous advantages as a business model, if it works. No subscription marketing and sales staff for example. If I am right then these social/policy issues of what is somehow best are irrelevant. Gold is taking off.

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POSTED BY DAVID WOJICK | MAR 6, 2012, 10:21 AM

4. Surely the danger is that what develops is a continuum of increasingly predatory/lax journals rather than a group one can identify as ‘the extreme’, this being an inevitable consequence of author-pays models in a publish-or-perish climate. In such a climate, the issue is not what authors can do about it (since they may be under so much pressure to publish they will go anywhere) but what funders will do, more specifically whether they will develop lists of ‘approved’ journals.

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POSTED BY RICHARD SEVER | MAR 6, 2012, 11:04 AM

- The same question applies to tenure committees (and other groups deciding student/career advancement). I know there are schools that place requirements on starting professors, x number of papers published in journals above y level of quality. One wonders if at some point there will be additional criteria added along the lines of “but the following journals don’t count:…”
5. Yes, the Chronicle got it wrong by calling these journals “online.” But I think Jeffrey Beall also gets it wrong by calling them “predatory.” What Beall has rediscovered is the vanity press.

POSTED BY PHIL DAVIS | MAR 6, 2012, 11:09 AM

Based on comments I received after publishing my list in December, I have begun to use the term “questionable” rather than “predatory.” I use this term in the continuously-updated list in my new blog: http://scholarlyoa.com/publishers/

This broadens the list a bit. Also, there are some publishers that still fit the “predatory” designation quite well.

POSTED BY JEFFREY BEALL | MAR 6, 2012, 12:01 PM

“Predatory” is an appropriate word as these journals do prey on those who are not able to produce sufficiently good work in the mainstream journals yet still require to play the number game. As an R&D administrator in a university in Malaysia, it has been a challenge to stop my colleagues from playing this type of number game but as long as there is a demand for the number of publications in KPIs/promotion criteria, I do not see an end to the supply of these journals. Fortunately, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education has already started to blacklist publishers in their research performance rating systems. This gives us some ammunition to better recognise work which is of a higher quality.

POSTED BY AARON GOH | MAR 7, 2012, 11:13 AM

6. Thanks for this useful and fair post on the topic.

This is a real problem for the article processing charge (APC) model of open access publishing. I think Beall however is on the wrong track in addressing this problem. Rather than trying to identify the bad apples, a nearly impossible task, a better approach is to set standards for legitimate high quality publishers and a system for certifying those that meet the standards. While not easy this is an approach that I think in time can work.
Also, the market itself is beginning to sort itself out. As Bentham Open found out, being sleazy can bite you in the butt. After 3 or 4 years in business with over 200 journals and each averaging only about 9 articles it's clear authors are not seeing the $800 they charge for publication being a good deal. You compare that the success of PLoS One or BioMed Central’s BMC series and it is clear the market is starting to work and authors are seeing the value of legitimate professional publishing.

For the APC model to really work, funding organizations will need to start setting standards for which publishers they are willing fund APCs. I think that is where is a real need for some type of certification process for publishers.

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POSTED BY DAVID SOLOMON | MAR 6, 2012, 12:20 PM

I have great respect for the works of Dr. Solomon. I fully agree with you. I believe that always competition is healthy. At least some of the new publishers (Hindawai, Co-action, Frontiers, etc) started to break the monopoly of the giants. It is a good sign for all of us associated with Open Access.

If a new and small publisher becomes victim of an unethical scientist, very fast we conclude that it is a predatory one (References: 1. http://scholarlyoa.com/2012/08/22/plagiarism-in-the-journal-of-sports-medicine-doping-studies/#more-614 2. http://scholarlyoa.com/2012/08/31/international-prank-involving-predatory-publishers-makes-headlines-in-indonesia/#more-642). If journal of a giant publisher becomes victim, we are ready to give this journal more and more chances to prove itself and we never conclude that this journal is not predatory (Reference: http://scholarlyoa.com/2012/12/19/publisher-charges-authors-for-retractions/). This tendency is not healthy. We (including me) should show more patience for the new before labelling it as bad. We should guide them what they should do or not. If the new publisher fails to prove its good wishes and repeatedly do the same mistakes, we must punish it with some label. But who are experienced and big journals, they should get less chance to prove. Yes, I do agree that there are some true criminals in Beall’s list, who are born to cheat people. They are shameless. Even they get n number of chances they will not correct themselves. They should be really punished by public defamation in your list. But I strongly believe that there are also some new players in Beall’s list who did some mistakes due to lack of experience and honestly try to correct those. But they are not getting sufficient chances to get out of Beall’s list. I agree that these new publishers (which are mainly small start-up), are showing immaturity by launching so many journals (50,100,150…or so on). If they really want to manage all the related journal operations ethically and rightly, then they should start with small numbers. They should make successful the first lot (3-6 only. Not more that that). Initial days, they are bound to do some mistakes. But if the number of journal is small, then amount of error will be less and then if you are sincere, you can correct those errors. Then apply those learning to launch next lot of journals (again not more that 3-6). Progressive learning and application of those learning makes things easier. This is the science. A big development can not come overnight. Whenever I see that a new publisher comes up with a fleet of journals, I imagine that this is going to again populate Beall’s list. Anyone related to journal publication, knows how difficult to manage religiously even the peer review formalities of 5 journals. Then for a serious publisher starting with 50/100 journals, will be nightmare. I think this trend started with Bentham Open, when they started 200/300 journal at a time some years ago. Too many journals mean too many errors. Then rectifying those errors will be next to impossible. Then the publisher will slowly enter inside the darkness of academic criminal publishing.

I think Beall’s work is really doing lots of good thing for the Open Access publishing, but it is slowly creating another big problem. It is creating a real new predatory class of open access publishers. Even the new publishers, who wants to follow good industry practices, has no way out from this list. So, even they want to be good and rectify the errors, they can not. So now these ‘transition level publishers’ will slowly become helpless. But real criminals will grow as (you believe it or not) there are some unethical author who want to easily publish their papers and they want these criminals help to publish their papers without peer review. But as the frustration will grow these ‘transition level publishers’ will slowly enlist their names with these criminals and one fine day they will also become real predator. So there will be one class i.e. born predator and there will be another class i.e forced predator (created by social isolation and punishment). We should be very careful in this case. In this blog and elsewhere Mr. Beall really wanted to do some good service for open access publishing. But as an indirect result of that work, we are creating a bigger problem. I strongly believe that every offender should get chances to become good. It is the base of our social system to allow every offender to rectify. We must punish the criminals. But at the same time we should be careful that our actions/rules/regulations should not create more criminals. I want to request Mr. Beall and other Open Access advocates in this particular aspect. Once you took the seat of the judge to decide who is predator or not, and slowly people accepts your judgement and view (as evident from your recent publications in Nature, Scientists, Higher Education Chronicle, etc), you enter in the more critical area, where much greater responsibility, care, patience are required. You must punish criminals and must allow initial offenders to become good and responsible. Otherwise you may unintentionally create lots of
‘forced predators’. History teaches us that ‘more power demands more patience and more responsibilities’. No doubt that you are now one of the most powerful voices related to open access publication. I hope that my suggestions will be taken positively.

7. Reblogged this on Construction Management and Economics and commented:
This article highlights a practice that is becoming more widespread. We are seeing increasing incidences of unknown, new journals seeking to re-publish papers from conferences and workshops, with very little peer review. The sting in the tail is that the author has to pay for this privilege...

8. A substantial number of non-OA journals supplement their subscription revenues with author charges of various kinds:
http://sharmanedit.wordpress.com/2012/03/08/author-charges/ Note that these are not peer review charges, so the risk of these journals morphing into vanity publishers with high acceptance rates is very present there, as well. But the self-correcting nature of the prestige and reward system seems to have prevented an all-out race to the bottom. Unless you count the persistence of journals of last resort — high acceptance rate journals with low readership that wouldn’t be able to sustain themselves without being bundled up in a big deal.

○ There’s a key difference between the charges for pages, color figures, and supplementary data and the charges of OA publishers. Page, color, figure, and data charges were put in place to deal with expensive color plates (color charges), expensive pages (editing and printing charges), and more recently, expensive data supplement processing and posting charges. The charges exist usually after an upper limit of some kind to ensure authors feel the additional figures, data, and pages are really necessary. The effect is to cone the information down to the essential elements needed to communicate results. I’ve seen authors present a weirdly colored line graph, face color charges, and realize that dashed lines in black-and-white would work even better. I’ve seen authors submit dozens of images, but when faced with figure charges, realize that they only needed three of the images to communicate their results, and the paper was better for the lack of image overload. Because the papers are selected for their quality without the editors dealing with the menu of charges — and because these charges are then manageable by the authors’ choices about what needs to be included or not — acceptance rates don’t factor in nearly as directly to the economics of publishing as they do with author-pays OA. In fact, as your post notes, most fees end up waived because color is deemed essential by the editors; most page charges only are incurred after a set number of pages, often a high number; and data charges are becoming more common after a certain point because these supplements are expensive and painful to handle (multiple files to track, often incompatible formats to reconcile, and review to be performed).
As for the “self-correcting nature of the prestige and reward system,” you have me wondering where that is. What is a high acceptance rate? 70%? No “big deal”? PLoS ONE qualifies, yet it is not viewed by authors as a journal of last resort. I don’t think the self-correcting mechanism is as powerful as might be hoped.

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POSTED BY KENT ANDERSON | MAR 19, 2012, 7:25 AM

○ It’s pretty funny, Kent, watching you scrabbling increasingly desperately to paint exploitative publisher practices as being for the benefit of authors. The other week it was “mandatory copyright transfer relieves authors of the burden of their copyright”. Today it’s “colour charges help authors to eliminate colour” and “figure charges help authors to eliminate figures”. Tomorrow, I confidently expect to read “paywalls help articles to be more widely read”, then “elevated subscription fees help libraries to allocate their budget more effectively”.

The puzzling part of this is figuring out whether you actually believe these things yourself. Either answer is unpalatable. If you do, then you are disconnected with reality. If you don’t, then your belief that your readers will believe you indicates contempt for our intelligence. I suppose Hanlon’s razor indicates that I should assume the former until proven otherwise.

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POSTED BY MIKE TAYLOR | MAR 19, 2012, 7:50 AM

○ Mike,

Thanks for the insults, once again. You’re class. What experience do you have running a peer-review and publications process? From what I can tell, zero. But you definitely have opinions uninformed by experience. Uninformed opinions are everyone’s favorite kind, I think.

I believe these things because I have experience with them — first-hand experience (as an editor, peer-reviewer, author, and publisher) that authors get better papers when they’re forced to economize words, figures, and so forth; that authors are better protected from abuse if publishers work on their behalf around copyright protections; and that strong peer-review does a better job of filtering and directing papers to the destination most likely to have an effect. Authors can be vain, self-interested, and egotistical. In my experience, the best editorial and review processes are about the reader, not the author. This translation of perspectives can be wrenching for authors, but ultimately good for their work’s presentation and sustained role in the literature. Fees are one way of managing author egos, vanity, and self-interest.

It’s interesting — journals that don’t charge for publication, set limits like “more than 7 pages of text means you have to pay for those additional pages,” and have guidelines like “color figures in which color isn’t essential to the figure will cost you money to publish” are, in your words, “exploitative,” yet publishers that charge authors for the mere act of publication are not? Most authors get through the fees structure we’re discussing without paying anything — they keep their reports within a few thousand words, let b&w charts and tables convey the data, etc. So if fees are imposed on a small minority of the most vainglorious authors after requests to avoid same fees, that’s “exploitative”? But if fees are imposed on nearly all author-pays OA papers using a lower standard of peer-review (“methodologically sound”), that’s not? I really don’t understand where you’re coming from.

Be careful, Hanlon’s razor cuts both ways.
Surely see the difference between (A) charging a publication fee and making the resulting article open to the world and (B) charging a publication fee and locking the resulting article behind a paywall.

I do see the difference — one charges every author a fee for publication services whether readers want the content or not; another charges authors only if they go over certain fairly generous allowances for content, and charges readers who want the content.

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