



Setting New Publishing Standards after the Beall's List

Dear Editor,

The recent letter published in *The IJOEM* by Chirico entitled “‘Predatory journals’ or ‘predatory scholars?’ the essential role of the peer review process”¹ tackles an important issue of the so-called “predatory” journals and publishers that have spread aggressively, just like weed, exploiting the open-access publishing model and luring academics to publish their papers for money. The letter was a reaction to an interesting Editorial entitled “Predatory or legitimate journals”² that also discusses the same topic and explains why predatory journals constitute a problem for scholarly publishing.

The term “predatory journals” was coined by Jeffrey Beall, a librarian from Colorado Denver.³ Beall's “list of potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access journals” emerged in 2012 as his reaction to the Open Access (OA) publishing model that emerged as an alternative to the large publishing companies that controlled the vast share of the academic publishing market. OA model lets the authors to pay for the publication of their papers once they are peer-reviewed and accepted for publication—the so-called “author pays principle.” However, despite all its obvious advantages, Beall disliked the OA and virtually blamed it for the rise of predatory publishing, calling OA model (especially, the so-called “golden OA”) a failure.⁴ In the same time, he never even touched the subject of non-OA journals,

especially the journals published by the large publishing companies (eg, Elsevier), which were also accused of similar practices by other researchers before.⁵

In January 2017, Jeffrey Beall shut down his blog and removed it from the Internet. However, academic publishing became even more difficult without the Beall's list. In the absence of the Beall's list but with the seeds of suspicion planted by it in the minds of academics worldwide, numerous cases of academic publishing “witch hunts” in various countries are reported.^{6,7} With regard to the above, an interesting point in your Editorial stating that a journal indexed by *MEDLINE* and the *Directory of Open Access Journals* (DOAJ) is unlikely to be a predatory journal. Since *MEDLINE* and *DOAJ* provide safeguards that are good enough, how about such world reputable and prestigious databases as *Scopus* and *Web of Science*? There were journals accused of predatory practices by Beall that were, in the same time, indexed in these databases. Should the researchers publish in them anyway or should they search for some other lists and publishing ethics committees' guidelines now that Beall's list is gone? It is peculiar that in the absence of the Beall's list some researchers feel that *Scopus* and *Web of Science* are not good enough and are prepared to spend lots of time and efforts on lobbying for introducing their own ranking systems that would allow small groups of local academics to control job promotions and grant funding in their respective coun-

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tries.⁸ These systems, however, would lead to the situation when small groups of academics might seize control over the career promotion committees and dictate who is getting promoted and based on what criteria. The rules of the publication game might be changed repetitively during the game, and this is fundamentally wrong.

Although Beall's list helped to raise awareness about the predatory publishing and sparked the wide discussion within the academia, it had many serious flaws and issues, such as, for example, insular rhetoric or discrimination based on the country of origin or the publisher's native language.^{9,10} And, it is unlikely to be replaced easily; one of the novel alternatives is the Cabell's blacklist by Cabell's, the scholarly analytics company from Beaumont, Texas, which attempts to seize the empty niche on the tiny academic market and to become the next fighter against the dubious practices of science journals, but which charges a hefty fee for using its database and therefore is unlikely to get popular.¹¹

We have to do something to identify the fraudulent journals and publishers, but this has to be done in an organized and civilized way. Since most would agree that one of the most typical features of suspicious journals is the absence of a proper peer-review, perhaps a new initiative called "Publons" might help. Publons is a database of peer reviewers linked to the ORCID identification control scheme that encourages reviewers to peer-review academic papers and earn virtual tokens or "publons."¹² The initiative found many supporters including Wiley, Sage, Springer Nature, and Cambridge University Press, among others. Some universities reportedly started checking the Publons profiles of their new job candidates. Some might argue that Publons is currently "too many clicks away" to work properly, but the initiative introduced a novel trend that might be further developed and improved (not to

mention that it invented a new way how to lure potential peer reviewers [who are always in shortage] into reviewing more papers free of charge).

Introducing the transparent and functional system of peer reviewers' identifications would allow us to kill two birds with one stone: it would enable us to combat predatory publishing (since the absence of peer-review or the "staged" peer-review is, effectively, the only legitimate way to identify the predatory journals and publishers) and to corroborate disputable research outcomes in academic articles. If all reviewers were using some sort of identification, it would be possible to check whether any given article was peer-reviewed at all and by whom. This issue is becoming especially relevant in the light of the new development in the historically first US court order issued by a state judge in California, which demanded the academic publisher to identify the anonymous peer reviewers of an article published in 2013 in *The Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research*.¹³ Peer reviewers' confidentiality has for long been the cornerstone of academic publishing even though many academic journals are already using a system when the author can suggest the reviewers during the article submission. Yet, there might be a time for a change and unmasking the peer reviewers can become the new reality.

Overall, it seems that if we want to battle the dubious academic publishing, we need to build a robust, open-access, widely available journal metric that would allow us to avoid pejorative naming, and to rely upon transparent human-unbiased verification processes.

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