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# Predatory Publishing

Andreas Sieß

Bonn-Rhein-Sieg University of Applied Sciences

 0009-0001-0589-7254

andreas.sieess@h-brs.de

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**ABSTRACT** This article investigates the ramifications of predatory publishing for the integrity of research and public trust in science. It delineates the phenomenon as the dissemination of scholarly works not subject to quality assurance and explores the motivation of both publishers and researchers to engage with such outlets. While the prevalence of predatory practices within academic databases and the complexities in distinguishing legitimate journals from predatory ones are critically examined, strategies to combat predatory publishing are also outlined.

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## Introduction: How far can an academic paper be trusted?

What does it mean when trust in the predominant format of scientific communication is eroded? Consider the possibility that even esteemed academic publishers disseminate scholarly journals (see **\* Scholarly Journals**) that are subsequently revealed to be problematic due to “predatory” practices. This very situation occurred in 2009 when Elsevier, a prominent player in the scientific publishing community, retracted six journals on suspicion of employing methods linked to *predatory publishing* ([blogs.nature.com](http://blogs.nature.com)). This incident raises questions about the nature and phenomenology of predatory publishing and why it poses such a significant problem for academia.

## Definition: What is predatory publishing?

Predatory publishing can be defined as the practice of disseminating scholarly works—such as articles, conference proceedings, and reviews—without conducting a rigorous review process (see **\* Peer Review: Publications**), while often mimicking the formal structures of legitimate academic publishing. This lack of quality control results in the infiltration of potentially substandard works into the academic discourse (Kulczycki et al. 2021, 8549; Beall 2017,

276–277), which, despite their questionable quality and integrity, may still be perceived as credible scholarly publications. The term “predatory publishing” was coined around 2010 by librarian Jeffrey Beall (Elmore and Weston 2020, 607) who also established one of the most prominent platforms for raising awareness about the scope of this issue. Known as [Beall's List](#), this platform cataloged and documented a total of 1,326 journals or journal groups suspected of engaging in predatory practices. However, since 2016—with the exception of a minor update in 2021 that was not authored by Beall—this list has not been actively maintained and is considered to be (partially) outdated. A more current and comprehensive resource can be found in Cabells' [Predatory Reports](#) which operates on a (paywalled) subscription basis and identifies over 10,000 journals as predatory (Grudniewicz et al. 2019, 211).

The accessibility and decentralization of digital technologies has generated more opportunities to create journals and publishing outlets without committing to resource-intensive editorial processes such as quality assurance, editing, peer review organization, and typesetting. The actual number of predatory publishers may, therefore, be significantly higher than documented. Due to these developments the distinction between legitimate and predatory publishing is not always clear-cut, resulting in a broad gray area that varies according to the publication cultures of academic disciplines. Consequently, the term “predatory publishing” has become less frequently used in science communication research which now often refers to the concept as *potentially predatory publishing* (PPP) to acknowledge the complex nature of the phenomenon (Marina and Sterligov 2021, 5019).

## Motivation: Why some publishers engage in (potentially) predatory practices

Publishers may be incentivized to engage in predatory practices for the following reasons:

- Financial benefit: Particularly for online-only journals, the technical effort required for publication is minimal due to the absence of a traditional editorial process, including peer review and editing. Publishers can charge significant fees, often amounting to hundreds or thousands of dollars, for this minimal service. These fees are typically borne by the researchers (Beall 2017, 278) and are frequently presented under the guise of “open access fees,” “article processing charges (APCs),” “page charges,” or “general submission fees.”
- Communicating reputation/PR: In some cases, large corporations also launch their own journals which might be classified as engaging in predatory publishing practices. The reputation of the scholars involved and the prestige associated with an (alleged) academic publication outlet are leveraged to enhance the publisher's own standing, a tactic particularly relevant in fields where reputation is crucial, such as pharmaceuticals and medical technology.

## Motivation: Why scholars publish in (potentially) predatory publications

Scholars may opt to publish in such journals (or other publication outlets) for several reasons:

- **Ignorance:** Distinguishing between legitimate and predatory journals is not straightforward, especially in the case of PPP products that appear to be professionally produced. This challenge often leads early-career researchers (Moher and Srivastava 2015, 1; Berger 2017, 212) or those working across disciplines, who may be less familiar with the publication culture outside their main field, to inadvertently submit their work to predatory publishers. Furthermore, some practitioners of predatory publishing deliberately mimic the names and designs of legitimate journals to confuse and attract submissions from inexperienced researchers (Siess 2025, 5059).
- **Social identity threat:** A relatively underexplored phenomenon, particularly in Western academic research, is the concern felt by scholars from the majority world that they might encounter discrimination when submitting their research to reputable, often Western-dominated, publishers (Kurt 2018, 142). This concern, which is partly explained by distrust of the impartiality of the double-blind review process, tends to make them prefer journals with editorial boards from their own origins. They are consequently more susceptible to engaging with potentially predatory publishers (Kurt 2018, 144).
- **Publication pressure:** Academics often face a “publish or perish” culture that mandates a minimum number of publications per year (Hedding 2019, 267; see **\* Publish or Perish**). Given the uncertainties inherent in legitimate research, which may not always yield publishable results within a specified timeframe, potentially predatory publishers, who place no emphasis on substantive content, offer a means of meeting these publication requirements.
- **Publishing fringe and pseudoscience:** On the one hand, the lack of quality assurance in many potentially predatory publications makes it possible to publish pseudoscientific or fringe science work that would not be accepted by reputable outlets (see **\* Scientific Fraud**). Additionally, these platforms can be used to disseminate research that does not meet established scientific or ethical standards (see **\* Good Scientific Practice**). On the other hand, journals that may be classified as potentially predatory provide a publication venue for (legitimate) scientific inquiries that cater exclusively to niche audiences. This includes research focused on phenomena with tight geographical limitations where the findings are not generalizable and are solely pertinent within that particular locality (Kurt 2018, 145).
- **Language barriers:** The dominance of English as the de facto lingua franca of science poses challenges for researchers wishing to publish in other languages. Due to budget constraints,

professional translation services are often unaffordable for research institutions, creating a niche for disreputable publishers to offer publication in the authors' native languages.

- Risk management and timeliness: Submission to a legitimate publisher carries the risk of rejection or demands for significant revision, which may involve additional studies or subjects, thereby increasing the workload significantly. Many researchers see the peer review process as a gamble and subject to reviewer bias. Embracing the challenge of the rigorous process of peer review, including revision and amendments, is laborious and not guaranteed to result in publication (Shaghaei et al. 2018, 11-12). In contrast, potentially predatory publishers may at best conduct superficial reviews, offering researchers a more certain and less burdensome path to publication. Moreover, prestigious journals often have lengthy publication timelines, ranging from weeks to months, which can be problematic for researchers under time constraints, such as those with fixed-term contracts or doctoral candidates. Many predatory journals thus offer "fast track" publication, enabling articles to be published within days of submission since they are not dependent on cumbersome and time-consuming peer review (Elmore and Weston 2020, 608).
- Costs: Even legitimate publishers sometimes impose substantial publication and open access fees, which can be prohibitively expensive, based on the journal's reach and reputation. While some established publishers have implemented a means of "dynamic pricing" that adapts the fees to reflect the typical income levels in the researchers' own countries, the high publication costs at some reputable publication outlets remain unaffordable for many scholars from the majority world or early-career researchers. This drives them towards predatory journals that offer more affordable publication options (Manca et al. 2018, E1043-E1044).

Considering these various aspects, it should not be automatically assumed that scholars who publish in potentially predatory publications are acting with disingenuous intent. Instances of renowned and established researchers listing publications in their records that have been disseminated through potentially predatory publishers also illustrate this point.

## Prevalence of the phenomenon

The phenomenon of predatory practices is not exclusive to obscure or newly established publishers. As already outlined, it can also be found among established publishing houses. Examples have been recorded of journals produced by reputable publishers being identified as engaging in predatory behaviors, particularly when the editorial standards have not adhered to the ethical guidelines in scholarly research. The publisher Elsevier, as noted earlier, had to discontinue six journals in 2009 due to questionable practices ([blogs.nature.com](https://blogs.nature.com)). Additionally, publications catego-

rized as potentially predatory publishing have been discovered in academic databases that are frequently recommended by various checklists that aim to identify reliable scientific sources. Although a study addressing this issue was retracted due to methodological flaws (Abramo et al. 2023, 1460), instances have been documented of potentially predatory publications being listed in reputable databases such as Web of Science (Clarivate), PubMed and Scopus (Elsevier) (Gasparyan et al. 2016, 1877; Manca et al. 2018, E1043; Marina and Sterligov 2021, 5039).

Most discussions on predatory publishing have predominantly centered on journals since they constitute the primary mode of scholarly dissemination across many academic disciplines (Safra 1987, 28). However, the academic community also encounters predatory practices in conference organization. In this case, predatory behavior extends beyond the collection of conference fees to include the publication of conference proceedings which are often monetized without conducting editorial quality assurance.

## Mitigation strategies and identification of potentially predatory publishing for readers and authors

To assess the legitimacy of a publisher or a journal, reference is commonly made to various checklists designed to ensure a basic level of academic integrity. For instance, the [Think. Check. Submit.](#) initiative offers a tool aimed at assisting authors in evaluating journals or publishers. A condensed version of this checklist can also be found at [The Helmholtz Association](#). It is important to note, however, that these checklists only serve as an evidential basis for assessment, leaving a residual risk for the submitter.

Another approach utilizes whitelists or blacklists which compile directories of all legitimate publishers or lists of known disreputable offerings, as exemplified by *Beall's List*. The use of these checklists, particularly whitelists, may inadvertently reinforce the current status quo within the publishing landscape, thereby diminishing the chances for new, innovative, or experimental publication formats to gain traction in academia, despite their legitimacy.

Some checklists also consider the “esthetic” quality, such as website design, paper layout, and typesetting, as criteria for evaluation (Berger 2017, 210), potentially leading to the erroneous categorization of legitimate but underfunded media as predatory. This further entrenches the dynamics in the existing publication landscape (Grudniewicz et al. 2019, 212) which are characterized by the dominance and gatekeeping of a few established publishers. Using whitelists, on the other hand, may also fall short in capturing the dynamic nature of the publishing field; instances have arisen where a journal, once deemed reputable, was discontinued by its editors or publisher, and its title (along with its URL) was subsequently acquired by a potentially predatory publisher (Siler et al. 2021, 563–564). Thus, without regular updates and maintenance, these lists quickly become outdated.

Moreover, the accessibility of many databases is limited to institu-

tional levels, such as university libraries, which may not be freely available to all researchers. Comparisons between established lists also reveal inconsistencies, with some journals or publishers being categorized as PPP on one list while considered reputable on another (Grudniewicz et al. 2019, 211). Furthermore, checklists may not fully account for disciplinary differences between publication cultures—the double-blind peer-review process, for example, is widely regarded as a standard for scientific integrity in the natural and engineering sciences, whereas the humanities may rely more on editorial reviews for quality assurance (see [\\* Epistemic Cultures](#)).

To identify predatory publishing, both authors, at the point of submission, and readers, upon reception, must consider a multitude of criteria that may vary across disciplinary cultures and could potentially result in the marginalization of research outside the Western academic establishment. Despite these complexities, checklists remain valuable tools in practice. They should, however, be employed with a critical and reflective approach during evaluation.

## Conclusion: Predatory publishing as a communication problem

In conclusion, it can be asserted that the phenomenon of predatory publishing is highly problematic not only for internal academic discourse but also for the communication of science to society at large. Given that even experienced researchers occasionally find it difficult to determine whether a journal or publication should be approached with caution due to its association with a predatory publisher, how can the general public be expected to make this distinction? If people can no longer rely on the dominant format of scientific publication—journal papers in the sciences or monographs in the humanities—being credible and legitimate solely by virtue of their form and its implied processes of quality control, the question of how non-experts can recognize “good” science becomes pressing. Combating predatory publishing, and particularly addressing the underlying causes that have led to this phenomenon, is, therefore, crucial not only for the integrity of academic discourse but also for ensuring the legitimacy, credibility, and trust in the scientific system as a whole.

On dominant publication formats in individual academic disciplines, see Saffran (1987, 28) and the German Research Foundation (DFG) report [Publishing Strategies in Transformation?](#)

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## Further reading

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Further reading is a section where each author makes recommendations for interesting publications that widen the scope of the respective topic or are particularly valuable for deeper research.

### How to cite:

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