

Spotting predatory (fake) “journals”

Because so many scientists and other academics around the world are required to publish articles in English-language international journals, and because of the rise of the Internet, there has been a huge increase in the number of websites that claim to be scientific journals and publish almost anything submitted to them if a certain amount of money is paid. In January 2017, ScholarlyOA.com, the leading source of information on questionable publishers of open access journals, journals that may be predatory, and related matters in academic publishing, listed 1,200 individual publications that had met its criteria for being possibly or probably predatory and listed 1,000 publishers (each of which may have dozens of “journals”). Five years before, there were only 18 publishers on the list. The founder, Jeffrey Beall, noted that there were even more than were yet on the list, with new ones almost daily.

What makes a journal predatory?

In science, the standard is peer review of submitted articles—peer review that is thorough and performed by experts on the topic. It usually involves interaction between the author(s) and the peer reviewers to reach a final version of the article that is scientifically sound, clear, and accurate. Predatory journals pretend to have peer review, but it is either nonexistent or very quickly and superficially done by an “editor”. Articles for which a certain fee is paid, often at the time of submission, are almost always accepted, and often they do not appear to be edited at all.

By contrast, legitimate open access journals, and journals that offer an open access option, bill for and accept the fee after peer review and acceptance, and (in open access option) after the author chooses to publish that way. Many other journals do not have author fees at all because they are supported by subscriptions.

What about Scopus and these predatory websites?

Scopus is a very large citation index, not intended to be a “white list” of quality journals, and so some predatory journals have managed to get into it. (It seems to be less of a problem with Web of Science, but not impossible.) Usually their coverage is discontinued after there have been complaints—the new list of discontinued titles shows that nearly 300 journals have been removed since 2012 for “publication concerns”—but at any given time there are some predatory sources that are on and generating many hundreds of articles.

When a journal is removed, the individual articles are still retained in the database under the name of the author (some say it may be because of concern for authors’ jobs), and the journal’s name is shown with it. This means that there are thousands of “fake science” articles that continue to appear in

Scopus, along with the names of journals that may at first look genuine that have actually been removed from coverage.

Why is all this a problem?

Science is supposed to be science. (And getting valuable input from good peer reviewers is an important opportunity for most authors.) But also—although keeping up with all the new journals that are possible on the Internet is a challenge for everyone—people in science and academia around the world are aware of this phenomenon. Those with fluent English and experience with journals are often quick to spot the anomalies of these sites, but in any case there are ways of examining them and seeing that an author has engaged in “pay to play” instead of working harder to be in a real journal.

This will harm or even spoil the reputation of the author internationally and his or her opportunities when making an application for a conference presentation, an academic program of some kind, or a job, and possibly also when later submitting an article to a real journal. It also harms the reputation of the author’s university and wastes work, money, and other resources that could have been used in a better way that advances the researchers and the university. In the big picture, some of the predatory publishers are using their huge profits to buy out struggling legitimate journals (without revealing exactly who they are), so it is also helps make the problem bigger and threaten science even more.

Additional problems may come with the “journal” demanding additional money while refusing to allow the author to withdraw the article, the unavailability of the full article online, and other unethical practices.

What can I do?

This is also important for your research—it will seriously weaken your research if you use articles from predatory sources as references in your work. The key is careful checking of all sources unless they are very well known (such as Elsevier and the other major publishers linked in the TSU Library’s website)—everything else should be checked. It’s essential to be very careful about the exact words and spelling, because the predatory sources often choose names that are very close to those of legitimate ones.

You can also know the names of some of the most infamous predatory publishers, with hundreds of “journals”. If you see that the publisher of something is, for example, IDOSI or Canadian Center for Science and Education, you already know it’s a fake. Publishers do not have a mix of journals, it is all one way or the other.

Unfortunately, it has become difficult to access lists of predatory journals online because of the pressures put on the people making them by the predatory publishers. But if you Google the name of the

supposed journal and the word predatory, you may find some past discussions that will provide some clues. Also, below are the links to the archived Beall's list (it goes to 2017), both journals and publishers.

Another way to check is to check Scopus's list of discontinued journals (see the link below). If the publisher of the journal you are looking at is one of the publishers of journals that were discontinued for "publication concerns", the journal you are looking at is predatory, even if the journal itself is not on the list (and of course, the journal is predatory if the name is on the list of journals).

And—it's essential to know some of the characteristics of predatory sources and use critical thinking about anything you encounter:

Characteristics of predatory sites

- Spam emails. Real journals do not need to advertise by email. It is safe to assume that any emails are from predatory sources, even if they use your name and mention your topic, unless you have signed up for an organization's mailing list.
- The "journal" prefers short articles (typically 4 pages) and charges more for longer ones; it publishes many short articles (20 or more) in one issue and has a new issue more often than every 2–3 months. (The total articles published in a year can be viewed and compared to other journals, and usually it will be hundreds instead of dozens.)(This may be different for some legitimate journals that have adopted more of a newspaper-type format, such as *Current Science*.)
- Names of publishers and journals that include words such as "science", "academic", "American", "Canadian", "European", and—especially—"international". Of the 1,200 individual journals that were on Beall's List, over 600 are titled "International Journal of..."! A fake that was removed from Scopus has a typical title, *American Journal of Applied Sciences*. They prefer broad titles so that they can "publish" anything they get.
- They do not give a physical location for their offices, or if they do give one that is in the United States or Canada, a search of Google and Google Earth shows that it is a rented post office box in a place that forwards mail. (These searches are interesting!)
- One journal has articles on many different, unrelated topics; one publisher has journals on almost everything under the sun, often with similar templates and appearance. One author has 8 or 9 articles in the same year (with few or no co-authors).
- No editor is given, or the details about the editor and editorial board are few; or one or two people are the editors of all the publisher's journals. Also, many real academics have had their names and credentials "hijacked" onto predatory sites.
- The goals of the journal are vague: "To improve the future."

- The website has misspellings and other English errors, even small ones. (This is never acceptable even if the journal is published in a non-English-speaking country.) The articles themselves have many basic English errors, even in the title. They prey on non-native speakers of English and many of the mistakes are ones that they may not notice.
- The site may look very nice and have a great deal of information, because it can easily be copied from legitimate sources, but there are still mistakes and omissions; many badges and emblems are used that have little meaning but make it look important, and in some cases colorful photos of people doing something that looks important.
- Payment for an article (and/or editing the article) should never by itself guarantee publication. And legitimate journals never have PayPal or credit card links on their sites, in our experience.
- Bottom line: The articles themselves look like articles at first glance, but are often on obscure topics, hard for anyone to understand, and lacking in methodology and in meaningful content.

Conferences, conference journals

The business in fake conferences and conference journals is also booming, much of it done by some of the same predatory publishers. This has become a very lucrative area because it is so easy to do them, and so many people need to have conference and publishing activities on their record each year. All potential conferences and conference journals should be checked extremely carefully before investing any time, work, or money.

Archives of Beall's List

Publishers: [Archive.is](#) | [Archive.org](#)

Standalone journals: [Archive.is](#) | [Archive.org](#)

Hijacked journals: [Archive.is](#) | [Archive.org](#)

Some articles on this topic

<https://media.nature.com/original/magazine-assets/d41586-021-02906-8/d41586-021-02906-8.pdf>

<http://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/beware-academics-getting-reeled-scam-journals/>

https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/29/upshot/fake-academe-looking-much-like-the-real-thing.html?_r=0

<https://herb.hse.ru/data/2016/03/02/1125175286/3.pdf>

<https://arstechnica.com/science/2017/03/scammy-science-40-journals-appointed-a-fake-person-as-editor/>