

RESEARCH FROM RICHES TO RAGS: AN INQUISITION INTO PREDATORY JOURNALS IN INDIA

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Abstract *The recent years saw the widespread mushrooming of publishing agencies in India. Along with them a lot of predatory journals too were created. This is a serious problem as predatory journals gravely undermine honest, ethics, and the truth value of research. However, scholars still fail to understand the predatory nature and the reasons for this large scale mushrooming. The article analyses the causes that contribute to the growth of hoax publications both from the publication as well as the author's side. The study shows money as the major driving factor while the insistence of quantity more than quality by the higher education authorities as an aiding impetus. Since predatory journals are a global problem, it calls for proper discussions and remedial measures which the article does.*

Keywords: *Predatory Journals, UGC, Publishing, Indexing, Journal Ethics, Impact Factor*

INTRODUCTION

Research involves discovery as well as dissemination of knowledge. Only after imparting the knowledge found that the research will be complete. As scholarly work proliferated in India in the past decades, the gradual movement of academia from subscription-based journals to open access journals, where the readers don't have to pay, was seen. The emergence of open access journals also saw the surfacing of bogus or hoax publications which Beall called 'predatory journals'. They misguide the authors, trick them into publishing, and make money. Sometimes scholars also make use of these predatory journals to fulfill their selfish needs. These attitudes have turned the noble nature of research into a commercial arena where money becomes the deciding factor in the research. However, still, scholars fail to understand the predatory nature and the causes of the large scale mushrooming of these journals.

The predatory journals use extensive methods to find their prey and manipulate them to publish. Unfortunately, there is no transparent way to identify these bogus publications. The closest one could find was the Beall's list compiled by Jeffrey Beall who also coined the term 'predatory journals' in 2008. According to Watson,

Beall's list was a website where information on the growth of online predatory journals, publishers, and conference organizers was listed. It provided an easy

checklist against the flood of uninvited emails from unknown publishers who send us 'Greetings' and refer to us as 'Esteemed' while outlining the purported benefits of sending them your manuscript.

Beall's List could be considered as a blacklist of journals that should be avoided. But, today the List is defunct and is replaced by Cabell's International, another similar one, and DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals).

As research became mandatory, the strategies employed by the predatory journals also evolved. They use personalized means to identify and track their prey through e-mails. Their modus operandi is much similar to the biological predation found in the animal kingdom. The five stages of predation involve detection, identification, approach, subjugation, and consumption. In case of predatory journals,

the 'detection' consists of finding authors who have published in other journals; 'identification' consists of getting their contacts; the 'approach' is the stage starting with CFP's and ending with the author paying no attention or being subjugated; the 'subjugation' is the submission stage; and 'consumption' coincides with charging the author (Petrison, 2).

These five stages underline the predatory nature of the journals. The naïve authors are orchestrated into publishing their hard-earned research in low quality, amateur publications and thereby undermining the quality and

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reach of the research. Many a time, scholars who have a publication history or whose contacts are available online receive these scam emails, as e-mails are now a common method of outreach.

The sole factor that drives predatory publishing is its intent to make money. Through the first two stages of predation, they identify potential authors and promise them speedy publishing with little or no peer review processes. These factors attract callow and desperate scholars to the journals. They review and accept the papers in a very short time which again evinces the dubious nature of these publications. The Article Processing Fees (APF) are the next step. The fees involved are often not transparent and is very high. Most of the time, only after the acceptance do the journals talk about the publication charges which leaves the author no choice, but to publish.

John Bohannon of Science in 2013 carried out a sting operation to expose the predatory and unethical nature of academic journals. He devised a comprehensive list of journals from both DOAJ and Beall's List. The final list contained 167 journals from DOAJ, 121 from Beall's List, and 16 listed by both. The existence of overlapping implies that even DOAJ is not free of hoax publications. Bohannon credible but mundane scientific paper with glaring mistakes which any peer-reviewer could easily understand. Since submitting the same paper to multiple journals at the same time may expose his operation, he designed a computer program that could generate hundreds of unique papers where only the variables change. The outcomes of this plan were outrageous. The results show that Beall's List is credible in identifying these hoax publications as "For the publishers on his list that completed the review process, 82% accepted the paper" (Bohannon). But the bigger surprise was given by DOAJ where 45% of the publishers accepted the paper. This again underlines the fact that DOAJ is not devoid of predatory journals to which DOAJ founder commented: "We have been working with the community to draft new tighter criteria for inclusion" (Bohannon). What Bohannon did was to prove the presence of vanity publishing in scholarly research. But the question of how to identify and avoid falling prey to predatory journals remains.

PUBLISHING ILLITERACY

There exists a huge literacy gap in the case of scholarly publishing. Ignorance or even a little knowledge is dangerous in this case. One should fully understand the nature and quality of a journal to avoid the predatory ones. There are no clear cut definitions to identify bogus publications. What one can do is to be aware of certain facts related to journals and publishing. One major feature is the journal names. Predatory journals often use titles tied to geographical areas especially the Global South like Asia, Africa, etc. The journals also

adopt 'brand' publishers as well as generic titles or with words like 'International' and 'Global' to show their scope. The creation of fake journal websites in the name of existing credible journals is a recent phenomenon. The title, logo, and most other features will be similar with slight changes which most authors fail to notice. Another important trait is the journal subject. Since predatory journals are motivated by money, the subjects dealt with by them are not limited. They cover a broad range of topics and subjects, and in most cases, one can find papers of almost all subjects. For instance, take the case of the journal Wutan Huatan Jisuan Journal. The official website of the journal declares that the area of research falls under the "wide variety of Science and Technology, Medicine and Pharmacy" (Home). But a simple survey of the articles published in the journal reveals that it publishes all kinds of subjects including Commerce, Arts, and Humanities. One should also focus on the editorial board and their qualifications. If the editorial board is not qualified enough, it seriously questions the trustworthiness of the review processes and the journal itself.

Most predatory journals provide a shorted review cycle, or an option to waive off the review by paying a certain amount. This attracts desperate and incompetent scholars who are in dire need of publications. The 'pressure to publish' motivate these less confident scholars towards predatory journals. The article acceptance time varies from each journal but almost all of them come around a week or two. "The 'record' shortest times are mentioned by Ambil Journals (48 hours) and Indian Journal of Research (3 days)" (Petrisor, 7). Fake indexes and unauthorized indexing becomes a major attraction in predatory journals. Scholars are not always aware of authorized and popular indexing agencies like Scopus or Web of Science (WoS). Most of them go with the flow and think that getting indexed by any agency is good which makes them prone to predatory publications. Lack of awareness regarding indexes like Impact Factor and ISI makes it difficult to identify fake indexes and in turn the predatory nature of the journal.

RATIONALE

Bohannon's Sting found that the Global South has become one of the breeding sites for hoax publications. Among them, India is leading, closely followed by Pakistan and Nigeria. But why does India become the home ground for these kinds of publishing "where new predatory publishers or journals emerge each week" (Petrisor, 6). Indian academics in recent years have repositioned their dictum of research to quantity rather than quality which contributed to the proliferation of fake journals that looked only for money, thus completely debunking ethics in publishing. Lack of publishing literacy is only one side of the coin where there exists an even darker side where academicians themselves go looking for predatory

journals just to increase their number of publications. "Research publications carry substantial weight in Indian universities for faculty selection, promotions, increment" (Patwardhan, 1). UGC devised an appraisal index named Academic Performance Index (API) which is required for career advancements and promotions as well as faculty appointments.

The Category III of the API score sheet provided by the UGC deals with Research and Academic Contributions. The Part A of the category considers research papers where marks are given to "refereed journals" or "Non-refereed but recognized and reputed journals and periodicals, having ISBN/ISSN numbers" (UGC). Part B considers research publications where also a similar criterion of ISBN/ ISSN is followed. ISBN and ISSN are respectively International Standard Book Number and International Standard Serial Number which are just serial numbers used to uniquely identify a publication. This is applicable not only for existing faculty but also for budding scholars as these same criteria of API score is used in the recruitment of assistant professors in colleges. "ISSN numbers are necessary for administration and logistics purposes, however, they do not reflect the quality of any journal, periodical or monograph" (Patwardhan, 1). These numbers have nothing to do with the quality of research done and hence cannot be considered as a quality parameter. This insistence of UGC on the quantity of publication rather than the quality led the scholars to increase their number of publications rather than focusing on serious research. These faulty and incompetent data gets published through predatory journals, thus polluting the academia.

It doesn't stop with API scores alone, "many universities have mandatory provision for a certain number of publications even before submitting the Ph.D. thesis and to get recognition as a Ph.D. guide" (Patwardhan, 1). The 'publish or perish' mentality of the higher education departments has led the scholars to find easy shortcuts for publications without actual research. Salami slicing becomes a preferred alternative by the academicians, especially with research stagnant scholars. Elsevier defines it as the 'slicing' of research that would form one meaningful paper into several different papers is called 'salami publication' or 'salami-slicing' (1). Since predatory journals do not care about the quality and have little or no peer review, academicians associate these kinds of unethical practices with them. The predatory journals offer fast publications of these low-grade research thus polluting the academia.

CONSEQUENCES

Academic pollution is a crucial impact of predatory journals. These journals provide a platform for hoax or bogus publications. Anything and everything can be published provided that money is given which reduces the research

to amateur publications. This lack of serious research leads to fraudulent data being available online thus ruining new researches too. Many of the predatory journals have managed to get indexed by credible indexing agencies like DOAJ, and PubMed.

Research publications of dubious quality that surface in these searches mislead even the more quality-conscious researcher. The flood of an increasing number of journals and, therefore of research/review papers in every discipline and the general restriction imposed by almost all journals on the number of cited references in an article, present a dilemma to the authors about what to cite and what to leave out (Lakhotia, 1408).

The new trend of 'cite while you write' has forced the scholars to cite even the low-grade researches in their articles leading to academic pollution. The process where papers of dubious distinction get cited in authentic academic work and thus attain legitimacy is called academic pollution. As mentioned earlier in the article, predatory journals have little or no peer review processes that result in the publication of faulty data. New and naïve budding scholars take up these articles and use them for their research as there becomes no distinction between what is authentic and what is not.

The proliferation of predatory journals, their continuous publication, and widespread usage creates a trend of low grade, amateurish research. The acceptance of these journals and their ISBN/ISSN as credible criteria for quality measures encourages scholars to continue publishing in them, thus avoiding the rejection factor which even the most experienced scholars fear of. Predatory journals too make themselves available and believable by using measures like fake indexes or getting indexed by little or no quality indexing agencies. Academicians throwing a blind eye towards such predatory publications for monetary benefits, seriously question the ethics of research as well as personal life. Research should never be allowed to be driven by money. Serious measures should be taken to reduce the hold of predatory journals on research.

REMEDIAL MEASURES

UGC's insistence on quality more than quantity has made the academic arena counter-productive. Many of the researches that get published do not provide any new knowledge and exist just for the sake of increasing the numbers. As the higher education authority, UGC should take effective steps in closing all its loopholes through which predatory journals thrive. Shifting from ISBN/ISSN to quality parameters is a welcome move. The new drift towards calculating the h-index instead of the number of publications can be seen along this line. As Hirsh quotes "h-index is given as "A scientist has

index h if h of his or her N_p papers have at least h citations each and the other $(N_p - h)$ papers have $\leq h$ citations each””. Even though h -index depends on the quantity, the quality of the published papers is also considered by including the citations in the index. UGC must also take measures to avoid non-scholarly indexes, especially ISBN/ISSN in appointments, increments, and promotions. It should also take adequate steps to shift its focus from ‘publish or perish’ to more quality-oriented research. Scholars must be driven not by a pressure to publish instead with an urge for the dissemination of true knowledge.

An initiative taken by the UGC to prevent the deplorable activities of the predatory journals is the UGC CARE list. Though it is a meaningful advancement, the list is not devoid of lacunae. The list includes journals from ICI (Indian Citation Index), which is a private, subscription-based database and hence of questionable intent and is known to include many predatory journals. This makes the list susceptible to predatory journals. Also, many good journals indexed by distinguished agencies like Scopus and PubMed are not indexed by UGC which makes one question its politics. Instead of indexing a few journals. It would be worthy to approve a few credible indexing agencies. This is a wonderful course of action taken up by many universities, thus avoiding the shortcomings of the CARE List.

Publishing literacy can tackle many of the problems related to predatory journals, indexing agencies, etc. Scholars and academicians should be oriented toward quality research. Awareness regarding credible indexing agencies like Scopus, WoS, and PubMed should be given along with COPE and WAME guidelines. In the case of publications, ignorance is not bliss, but grave danger. “The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) as a forum of editors and publishers of peer review journals promotes integrity in research publications” (Patwardhan, 1). They promote publication ethics among faculty, students, and scholars and is available online so that any interested scholar can access it. “These guidelines stress ethical and responsible research, compliance to relevant guidelines, transparent presentation of results, honesty and avoid plagiarism, fabrication, and falsification, or data manipulation” (Patwardhan, 1). Similar is the case with WAME which is exclusively for medical journals and editors. A recent collaborative is the Think. Submit. Check Campaign which “helps the researchers identify trusted journals and publishers of their research” (Think.Submit.Check). This initiative helps the amateur, naïve scholars to avoid the manipulation of the predatory journals.

CONCLUSION

Research is an inevitable factor in academia. But it is polluted with inauthentic and low-grade publications

due to the presence of predatory journals. The existence of such journals and the promotion of them through publications by money-driven, selfish scholars undermine the honesty and selfless nature associated with scholarly work. Though ‘Bohannon’s Sting’ brought the truth about predatory journals, they continue to expand their vicious circle to manipulate gullible authors and tricking them into publishing. A major reason is the lack of knowledge regarding publishing and indexing. Instead of blind trust, careful examination of journals and their background is necessary. The ‘publish or perish’ attitude was taken up by the higher education authorities like UGC shift the focus of research from quality to quantity. Introducing parameters like h -index and other citation indexes can reduce the willing use of predatory journals by scholars to an extent. Publication literacy and conscious and deliberate attempts to retain the ethics in research should be taken.

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