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Caveat emptor

Dear Sir,

"Caveat Emptor" is a Latin phrase for "let the buyer beware." It places on the consumers the burden to be vigilant before purchasing an item or availing themselves of a service. On a parallel track is the role of an author as a consumer when he pays for the publishing services to Open Access Journals (OAJ). Hence, it is crucial for the authors to examine the appropriateness of a journal and avoid becoming a victim.

Getting the articles published these days has become a child's play or perhaps even easier. The perfect milieu

already exists – the desperate, start-up academicians in developing nations[1] and the "predatory" journals which would publish anything if the researchers or their backers dole out the dough (exploiting the author-pays open access model).[2] These publishers joined the "open access" (OA) bandwagon since the low-quality, pseudoscience content in their journals would not generate enough revenue if they hid the content behind a paywall (the conventional subscription-based model). Since "publish or perish" environment builds tremendous pressure on researchers, they unknowingly fall a prey to these predatory publishers.[1]

Coining the term "predatory" on the basic premise that the journals are not what they quite claim, Jeffrey Beall's blacklist of these journals is ever expanding.[3] Email solicitations for manuscripts with undisclosed charges lure the inexperienced academicians, but only to receive a hefty invoice after the acceptance of the manuscript, observes Beall.[3,4] Sadly, the revenue is not spent on peer review, since acceptance by these journals is a norm, not an exception.[5] Green signal to articles full of plagiarism, data fabrication, and falsification not only highlights the substandard or non-existent peer review, but also the extent to which the OA model is exploited. The researcher is further enticed by offering a discount in the article fee and by promising a quick processing time.[1] The websites of these vanity journals may be amateurish at times,[3] yet many manage imitating the authentic ones.[2] Besides, it is a commonplace to find words like "global," "international" in the titles of these journals, so as to make them sound grand.[3,4] Moreover, there are as many titles as one can imagine, so as to cover every possible area of specialization. Also, the editorial board of the journal is shown to comprise eminent scientists and professors without their consent.[1] The authenticity of Beall's earnest efforts to expose these shady practices of publishing was proved when numerous OAJ accepted an obviously flawed paper sent as a part of a sting operation by John Bohannon.[5] Paralleling with Beall's blacklist, Lars Bjørnshauge, Managing Director of the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), is compiling a "white list" of OAJ and urges research funders to provide author fees only if the journal/publisher existed in the white list.[3] Beall, however, has been too critical about the OA movement as a whole and considers it to be the one which can be and has already been exploited badly. The OA zealots question the transparency of Beall's criteria and unknown members of his review board to have launched a blacklist year after year, while others have accused him of bribery to have removed a few journals' names from his catalog.[6] Also, the start-ups may be wrongly tainted with the label of "predatory." Further, there has been no scrutiny about the authenticity of the subscription-based journals.

Not every OA publisher is deceptive and exploitative.[3,7] In fact, the OA movement was born out of extreme starvation for research literature and its unequitable distribution (disruptive innovation), particularly in developing nations.[7] The for-profit subscription-based publishers would lock the academic content behind an expensive paywall restricting dissemination of scientific knowledge.[7] Sadly, the access to the articles was possible for the researchers only after paying massively inflated prices or if their libraries had a subscription for the same. Further, these journals reap out a monetary benefit for the work (research) done by the authors. The launch of OA movement, thus, provides relief from the stifling monopolistic control of subscription-based journals.[8] Also, OA combines the benefits of a rapid turnaround time by cutting down the lengthy wait period for articles to get processed and subsequently published.

The OA movement is condemned to be a corrupt process due to monetary transactions between the authors and the publishers.[3,4] This, however, is not true. Most OAJ are Gold OAJ that do not charge the authors (Gold access in its purest form- the direct Gold access).[8] Moreover, the invoices levied on the authors by some of the OA publishers (Hybrid open access)[8] are far less than the page charges (author side fees) of the subscription-based journals.[8] However, we live in a real world and there is a flip side to OAJ as well. The number of vanity journals, more so under the OA domain, is growing by leaps and bounds (disruptive innovation).[9] Hence, the researcher needs to be aware as to how to spot the fake and avoid being a victim. Floods of spam emails soliciting to submit a paper, particularly if the author is a newbie or from an unrelated field, should arouse suspicion.[9] Secondly, what is strikingly odd is presence of numerous typographical errors in these invitations.[3] Checking the number of citations an article receives, especially if it is from an OAJ, or verifying the number of downloads from the sites such as research gate or academia.edu might tell it all. Another sign to be wary is if the same publisher has launched a flock of journals at nearly the same time.[7,9] Little or no content in the journals or irregular publishing[7] or publishing articles full of plagiarism or self-plagiarism might be the other warning signs.[9] Further, these publishers obscure their place of origin and the organization,[3,5] or there is no meaningful relationship with the geographic location mentioned in the title of the journal and the place of origin of the journal/publisher.[9] The websites of these journals are incompetently designed[7] and often contain at least one empty dropdown menu[1] or dead links. Among others are included an improper or no usage of the ISSN/DOI number, a display of a view factor instead of the impact factor, and minimal or complete lack of copy editing.[9] Appearance of the journal name in the DOAJ catalog does not make it a legitimate one; however, absence from the list is worrisome.[7] The easiest way to spot the black sheep, however, is to refer to Beall's exhaustive list of "potential, possible, or probable predatory" companies.[1]

The poor quality content of these so-called predatory journals with little or no scrutiny may undermine academic dissemination. The gold rush in scholarly publishing has to stop for better. With no quality check organization to prevent ruining the scholarly communication and research misconduct, the onus is on the authors to select a venue for publication of their work after thorough diligence and, thus, avoid a trap[3] (caveat emptor).

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