

Think.Check.Submit.: the campaign helping researchers navigate the scholarly communication landscape

As the number of new publishers and journals increases, so does the emergence of deceptive or 'predatory' publishers. Inexperienced researchers, particularly those in the developing world, are known to be vulnerable to spam e-mails inviting them to submit papers to journals with no discernible reputation. Think.Check.Submit. is a collective response to this problem from cross-industry stakeholders. The campaign provides clear and simple guidance to help researchers make informed choices about their publications. The resources can also be used by librarians responsible for developing researchers' knowledge of the scholarly communication landscape or disseminated by industry groups working to support researchers in their publishing.

Introduction

In the summer of 2015 a number of stakeholders from across the scholarly publication sector who were concerned about what they termed 'deceptive publishers' and who recognized the value of providing guidance to support researchers in their publication choices came together to plan the 'Think.Check.Submit.' campaign.



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Membership

The original group comprised representatives from Springer Nature, Ubiquity Press, Co-Action Publishing, the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP), the International Association of STM Publishers (STM), the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), the ISSN International Centre, the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA), the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), INASP, LIBER and UKSG. I was invited to represent librarians on the group on behalf of UKSG. The campaign has been funded by contributions provided from within the group and has been promoted by commissioned communications experts. The campaign group is co-led by representatives from ALPSP, STM and DOAJ.

Getting the message out

Although researchers are the primary audience for the campaign, in the first year the working group aimed to raise awareness of it across the publishing industry and the academic library sector, to encourage support for the campaign as well as the adoption and dissemination of a consistent message to researchers worldwide. Communication efforts began in the autumn of 2015 with an initial press release,¹ the delivery of presentations at a number of events attended by members of the publishing sector, including the ALPSP 2015 conference, STM Week and the OASPA Conference 2015, and by distributing leaflets.

'The online resource ... helps researchers to identify trustworthy journals'

The online resource, which helps researchers to identify trustworthy journals to submit their work to, was launched in October 2015,² followed in November by posters that can be downloaded and, in January 2016, by a video. The resources have been

229 designed to be accessible to researchers whose first language is not English. A website usage data report created in April 2016 indicated that within six months of launching the online resources, the campaign posters had been downloaded approximately 300 times and the video had received almost 2,000 views. According to web traffic analysis, most hits come from Africa, with fewer hits but regular usage found in the Middle East, Eastern Europe and China.

A global focus

Having focused on communicating the campaign to sector partners in the first year, the second year of the campaign is targeted at the global community, with an emphasis on early career researchers (ECRs). The group aims to identify key ECR networks and is engaging ECRs via Twitter, using curated tweets about research and opportunities from outside the UK and US. Analysis of recent Twitter followers highlighted the increasing global spread of the campaign, from Latin America to the Middle East (Saudi Arabia and Kuwait), Africa (Algeria and Nigeria), India and Japan.

Educating researchers

Education is at the heart of the Think.Check.Submit. campaign. This approach aligns with the training and development programmes provided for researchers by many academic libraries and faculty teams, particularly in the developed world. Similarly, many established publishers and industry partners provide online guidance on the publishing process and tips on how to get published, as well as delivering face-to-face workshops. INASP's involvement in the campaign is consistent with the charity's AuthorAID project goals:

- to increase the success rate of developing-country researchers in achieving publication
- to increase the visibility and influence of research in the developing world.

Think.Check.Submit. aims to empower researchers so that they are equipped to assess journals when preparing a submission and choose the best possible journal for their work. As the number of new scholarly journals grows each year (by more than 1,000 titles per year according to STM's 2015 report)³ and the scholarly communication landscape continues to evolve, with the emergence of new publishers and innovative publishing models, having the tools and confidence to make a judgement about a journal or publisher has never been more important. Although Think.Check.Submit. focuses particularly on researchers as authors, an awareness of disreputable publishing practices has wider value for researchers. A story shared by one of the INASP team about a researcher who had inadvertently found himself not only publishing in a journal with disreputable editorial processes but also on the board of that journal highlights the vulnerability of researchers who believe they are following conventions in establishing their academic career. In this case, once the INASP team had alerted the researcher to the concerns about the journal in question, he removed himself from the board and has since published in more highly regarded journals.

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Assessing the unfamiliar

In this climate, even established researchers are faced with the unfamiliar. As both authors and advisors of younger colleagues, they may benefit from the encouragement to pause and consider when faced with a choice of journals. In my practice within the Scholarly Communications Team at The University of Manchester I have experience of varying reactions from researchers across career stages and across disciplines to changes in the publishing landscape: interestingly, the differences in opinions are not constant within disciplines or at certain career stages.

The University of Manchester research community includes passionate advocates of new publishing models as well as fierce resisters of any titles other than a long established 'top journal' and those who hold a strong belief in the notion that new publishers – especially open access (OA) publishers – are 'predatory', a term first used by US librarian, Jeffrey Beall, in 2012.⁴ For example, two of Manchester's most senior academics have expressed very different views of a particular OA publisher, which launched in 2007. The medical sciences researcher has published with this publisher on a number of occasions, thus giving his colleagues confidence in the credibility of the publisher. However, the social sciences researcher alerted the Library to 'a potential predatory publisher' on receipt of an invitation to submit a paper to a new journal from the same publisher last year. Both are influential in guiding the publication choices of their colleagues. It is important therefore that researchers at all career stages are aware of how to assess new or unfamiliar titles and publishers so that the research community adopts a consistent approach in support of peers. In the developing world the work of INASP is encouraging peer support through the creation of a community of researchers.

'It is important ... that researchers at all career stages are aware of how to assess new or unfamiliar titles and publishers'

Maintaining neutrality

The Think.Check.Submit. campaign takes a neutral stance. The guidance does not tell researchers which journals or publishers are not trustworthy and the campaign does not intend to launch a 'quality mark' for journals meeting the criteria set out in the checklist. The campaign working group believes that 'blacklists' are largely subjective and difficult to maintain, and to adopt such an approach would be inconsistent with the campaign's focus on encouraging researchers to develop the habit of applying quality criteria when assessing journals. Furthermore, blacklists do not allow for nuance, and their existence may suggest to researchers that established journals and publishers, or newer journals or publishers not listed, will always meet their expectations or needs, thereby discouraging questions about process.

The checklist

To empower researchers, the campaign group developed a checklist of questions that researchers might usefully consider when they are preparing to submit a paper to a journal. It also stresses that trustworthy journals follow industry standards and ethics, and encourages researchers to explore these. Obtaining answers to the questions should help researchers identify the quality indicators that they need in order to feel confident that the publisher of the journal they select can be trusted to provide a professional service, adding value throughout the publication process and ensuring the widest reach and visibility for their new addition to the scholarly debate. The campaign suggests that researchers should submit their work to a journal only if they can answer 'Yes' to most of the questions on the checklist. These include:

'To empower researchers, the campaign group developed a checklist of questions'

- Can you contact the publisher by telephone, e-mail and post?
- Is the journal clear about the type of peer review it uses?
- Is it clear what fees will be charged?
- Do the editorial board mention the journal on their own websites?

Support for researchers

The Think.Check.Submit. guidance is aimed at ECRs but is also valuable to anyone helping this group navigate the scholarly communication landscape, e.g. library staff, staff with

231 responsibility for researcher development and publishers. A number of libraries have added a link to the online resource on publishing guidance web pages, including the University of North Texas,⁵ the University of the West Indies,⁶ CQ University⁷ and Newcastle University.⁸ A librarian at the Zalk Veterinary Medical Library at the University of Missouri reported (via Twitter) using the guidance in seminars with researchers: 'I emphasize checklist as part of "where to publish" and "is this a scam" conversations. The Qs really click with my folks'.⁹ In countries with limited resources to provide publishing support on campus, such as China, freely available resources endorsed by trusted partners and companies such as the Edanz group are vital. The group reports that in China 'as part of the regular curriculum universities often have insufficient resources to give researchers the tools they need in order to tackle the entire publication process',¹⁰ and that institutions arrange extra-curricular workshops on publishing which are delivered by trusted partners such as Edanz and/or large academic publishers.

Target audience

Previous research has found that ECRs, usually young, inexperienced and often located in developing countries, are the group most likely to publish papers in untrustworthy OA journals.¹¹ This has been borne out by experiences shared by professionals working with researchers in Africa and Asia, and enquiries to both the University of Manchester's Scholarly Communications Team and the campaign group from or on behalf of researchers who have published papers in journals they later realize are not trustworthy. One such case concerns a prospective PhD student from Ethiopia who published two papers (from her MSc thesis) in two different predatory journals.¹² Although at Manchester we have received similar enquiries, it is encouraging that the majority of researchers who contact the team are querying whether a title can be trusted before submitting a paper. Through the work of INASP researchers in Africa are increasingly aware that some journals and publishers should not be trusted. The power of taking an educational approach to enlightening researchers is evident from the testimony of Carolyne Linet Awino Onyango who learned about deceptive publishers via one of INASP's online research writing courses and was encouraged to share what she had learned:

'The power of taking an educational approach to enlightening researchers is evident'

'The training enlightened me that I was actually on a downward spiral to oblivion. I could taint my reputation and credibility as a scholar by publishing in predatory journals ... Aha! Could this possibly be why some of my exemplary professors' most excellent proposals never attract any grant at all? To save fellow scholars in my university, I have prepared a seminar paper and given it the title "Of predatory journals, plagiarism and why scholars should be alarmed".'¹³

While more experienced academics often have target journals in mind when writing a paper, ECRs may be less certain about their publication choices and not familiar with emerging publishing models, e.g. publishers operating post-publication peer review, and so be more vulnerable to unsolicited invitations from deceptive publishers. In some disciplines and countries, researchers may be restricted in their choice of publication by approved journal lists. While such lists may ensure that papers are submitted to journals based on their journal impact factor and meet institutional key performance indicator (KPI) targets, this approach discourages the development of ECRs skilled in determining the credibility of emerging journals.

Added value

Although not a primary target audience, the campaign reminds publishers to check their own practices and assess the ease with which researchers can identify their quality indicators. It also highlights to other groups from across the sector, such as DOAJ and ISSN, that their approval of membership or allocation of publication identifiers may be interpreted as an endorsement of a new publisher by industry experts and reinforces the importance of stricter criteria and more rigorous checks than ever before.

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232 In summary, the campaign encourages responsible publishing from the publishing industry and from authors, as well as providing simple and attractive guidance materials which can be used by staff supporting researchers.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

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