The predatory publishing phenomenon: dead end or just an inconvenience on the road to a new scholarly publishing landscape?

Exploitation of the open access (OA) model by unscrupulous publishers can seem a threat to the future of scholarly publishing. Some see the proliferation of these publishers as a simple case of bad actors who need to be stopped. Further reflection and reading can lead to a realization that the situation is not nearly as simple as bad guys vs. good guys. Rather, what is happening can be seen as a natural outgrowth of the ease of publishing on the internet and the rise of OA publishing. A global economic market for publishing scholarly articles on the internet has emerged and is responsible in part for this phenomenon. There is a continuum of publishers that some term 'predatory' which ranges from clueless new publishers to outright frauds. The good news is that the emergence of this phenomenon has resulted in the development of professional associations, educational movements and best practices that can help educate authors, publishers, researchers and academia alike. In the end the situation might turn out to be one of 'temporary inconvenience, permanent improvement'.
Based on a breakout session presented at the 39th UKSG Annual Conference, Bournemouth, April 2016

'Predatory publishing': the term has an evil ring to it. A Google search reveals a long list of article titles that include the words 'predatory publishing' and 'threat'. The articles are filled with warnings about these ravenous predators. The phenomenon has been described in terms usually reserved for threats to life as we know it.

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What is going on here? A punch to the scholarly mystique? A witch-hunt? A case of moral panic? Wikipedia defines moral panic as a 'feeling of fear among a large number of people that some evil threatens the well-being of society'. Could this be what is going on? In his blog, *Confessions of a Science Librarian*, John Dupuis questions whether the moral panic over predatory publishing is overshadowing the failings of peer review and the subscription model.[1] Good questions, to which I would add a few questions about the effect of the changing marketplace for publishing and for being published.

Who are the predators?

'A punch to the scholarly mystique?'

Let's take a step back from the brink of panic and have a deeper look. Jeffrey Beall, the University of Colorado librarian who coined the term 'predatory publisher' and maintains a blacklist of these publishers, has characterized them as 'those that unprofessionally exploit the gold open-access model for their own profit …'[2] Fair enough. But is it fair that one person be the sole arbiter of who is a predator or not? The same Google search that combined 'predatory publishing' and 'threat' turned up a disproportionate number of articles authored by Beall himself. Can Beall and his list be responsible both for beneficial consciousness raising and also some of the moral panic about this phenomenon? Are those on Beall's list the only predators in the scholarly publishing environment? Are they all predators? Who else might be termed predators? Some would add large commercial and society publishers

who have continued to raise subscription costs well beyond what many libraries can afford. Some of these publishers have also been caught publishing scam articles. Some would add academics who serve on boards of dubious journals or who edit them. How about authors who pay to be published in journals they know have names similar to prestigious journals that have rejected their articles?

Who are the prey?

And what about prey? Are researchers the only prey? Are they all innocent victims? What about the public who might be deceived by the pseudo-science published in some predatory journals? What about libraries who provide access to journals some call 'fake'? What about scholars in developing countries for whom the deck might seem stacked against being published in mainstream journals?

There is no denying the wrongdoing of some publishers. On 26 August 2016 the US Federal Trade Commission filed a complaint against OMICS Group and two of its subsidiaries stating that this publisher deceives scholars and misrepresents the editorial rigor of its journals.[3] As head of the US ISSN Center, I have a few tales of my own to tell. One example is that during a phone conversation with a publisher seeking prepublication ISSN for a number of OA journals aimed at publishing post-doctoral research, I made the mistake of saying that my daughter was a post-doc at a major university. The publisher immediately offered to put her on the editorial board of a journal in her field. I told him that she was too busy for that and he replied that she would not have to do anything!

Good guys and bad guys

So, there are truly some bad guys out there. But is this phenomenon simply a question of good guys vs. bad guys? If only it were that simple. Rather, I see a continuum of publishers that ranges from well-meaning but clueless start-ups through amateurs, through those that are somewhat deceptive, all the way to outright fraudulent publishers who steal the identity of other journals. How are these publishers any different from disreputable businesses of any type in the age of the internet? Why should scholarly publishing on the internet be exempt?

'Is this phenomenon simply a question of good guys vs. bad guys?'

In addition to this spectrum of publishers, there is also a cast of actors that includes enablers, bystanders, reformers and innovators. The spectrum includes champions of open access, academics such as editors and peer reviewers, professional organizations, libraries and librarians, traditional publishers, governments – even ISSN centers – many playing a role for good or for ill, sometimes both.

Although librarians often focus on an idealized world where profit is for greedy commercial enterprises and information should be free, economic realities cannot be ignored. The ease of internet publishing, government mandates, library support for open access, selectivity by mainstream publishers and growing numbers of scholars worldwide with pressure to publish have provided a strong market for publishing opportunities. This is a legitimate market, but also tempting prey for the unscrupulous.

Does society have an absolute obligation to protect innocent researchers from those who would prey on their need to be published, no matter what the cost to the free market and to evolving new models of publishing? Might the label 'predatory publishing' harm the cause of open access? Or inhibit publishing in developing countries? More importantly, might the blanket condemnation of non-traditional publishing deprive science and scholarship of valuable discoveries and insights going forward? One hopes a balance can be found.

How can quality open access prevail?

OA publishing has worthy goals and is a growing trend. How can quality open access prevail? Although the information community seems to have been slow to react to a phenomenon that has been around since at least 2009, a ground-swell now seems in motion. In 2016 the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), which had formerly employed a strategy of broad acceptance including some dubious journals, instituted very specific criteria for inclusion and required all of its journals to reapply.[4] As a result, in May 2016 around 3,300 journals were removed and a set of basic requirements was adopted. Professional organizations also began to take action. The Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA) established a set of guidelines for quality OA journals.[5] A campaign called 'Think. Check. Submit.'[6] has been launched with a video encouraging authors to investigate potential journals and confirm their suitability before submitting articles. Even PubMed, which already had a vetting process, tightened and published its criteria.[7]

The role of the ISSN

'having an ISSN does not signify that you are a responsible journal'

And what about ISSN? Some mistakenly regard the ISSN as a 'Good Housekeeping seal of approval' for journals. Wrong. The ISSN is simply an identifier. Yes, it is a key identifier for serials and yes, most scholarly journals have an ISSN, but just as having a US Social Security Number does not signify that you are a good citizen, so having an ISSN does not signify that you are a responsible journal. An ISSN is just an identifier. It's that simple. In order to combat the wrong impressions, the ISSN International Centre, based in France, has included on its website the following statements:

'The ISSN's role is to identify a publication. It is a digital code without any intrinsic meaning. It does not include any information about the origin or contents of the publication. It does not guarantee the quality or validity of the publication.'[8]

The ISSN website goes even further in stating:

'We reserve the right to refuse an ISSN assignment if it is considered that misleading information has been provided by the requestor or printed/displayed on the publication regarding, for instance, the place of publication (publisher's address), the members of the editorial board, the referencing by indexing services or databases, the participation in digital preservation programs, or the authorship of the articles provided.'

'We also reserve the right to revoke an ISSN if it subsequently comes to light that misleading information has been provided.'[9]

So why should ISSN be assigned at all to dubious publications, publications some call 'fake' even though they have a very real online presence? The answer, again, is that an ISSN is first and foremost an identifier and these publications need to be identified and distinguished from the same or similar titles. In fact, one of the most egregious things these predatory journals do can be thought of as journal identity theft. They imitate journals of the same name in order to lure authors into submitting articles. The ISSN can distinguish these impostors from the original journals and can assist in tracking these imitations, helping to shine a light on them and provide data about them.

A proactive step taken by the ISSN International Centre was inception of ROAD: the Directory of Open Access scholarly Resources, which was developed in co-operation with UNESCO. ROAD 'provides a free access to a subset of the ISSN Register (1.8 millions of bibliographic records, available on subscription …)'[10] This subset comprises bibliographic records for OA resources which have been assigned an ISSN by the ISSN Network: journals, conference proceedings, monographic series and institutional repositories. Although ROAD is not really the 'white list' of OA journals some have wished for, it does provide a list of international open access resources created via the ISSN Network of 89 centers around the

world. The ISSN International Centre has also joined forces with others in the Think. Check. Submit. project. Supporting organizations include:

- Association of Learned & Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP)
- BioMed Central
- Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)
- Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)
- INASP
- ISSN International Centre
- Ligue des Bibliothèques Européennes de Recherche (LIBER)
- Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA)
- Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC)
- Springer Nature
- International Association of STM Publishers (STM)
- Ubiquity Press
- UKSG.

What can academia do?

'academia and open access often act like a dysfunctional couple'

Academia has a key role to play. Academia and OA publishing would seem to be a marriage made in heaven. Open access can remove the university's burden of paying faculty to research and publish and then paying again to buy back the results. It can provide lower costs to academic libraries and greater publishing opportunities to students and faculty. Nonetheless, academia and open access often act like a dysfunctional couple. While library budgets are being consumed by higher and higher journal and database subscription costs, many promotion and tenure committees continue to snub OA journals when evaluating present and future faculty.

On a positive note, academic institutions have now begun to raise the awareness of faculty and students about predatory and low-quality journals. One hopes this can be done in a non-alarmist fashion, one that does not imply that open access equals predation. Going further, academics should now be connecting the dots between the spam e-mails they receive and the nature of journals on whose editorial board they have been invited to serve without doing much work. Quality OA journals should be accepted as appropriate places to publish by promotion and tenure committees. Quality, not prestige, should be a criterion. 'Publish or perish' requirements should be assessed. Service as editors, peer reviewers, or on editorial boards should be scrutinized for legitimacy.

'Is predatory publishing a natural consequence of open access?'

Enter Sci-Hub

Ultimately we need to ask, is predatory publishing perhaps just an expected growing pain of an evolving market? A step on the way to a new paradigm? And, what might the impact of a site like Sci-Hub[11] tell us? Sci-Hub, a site that describes itself as 'the first pirate website in the world to provide mass and public access to tens of millions of research papers,' claims almost 50 million research articles available for free. It claims over 200,000 downloads per day in 2016 and statistics show that significant numbers of these downloads are from major US universities. These numbers provide another challenge to the scholarly publishing landscape as we know it. Is predatory publishing a natural consequence of open access? Is Sci-Hub the other side of the coin, a natural consequence of subscription-only access?

The bumpy road to a better future

Whether or not you consider open access a disruptive technology, or whether you consider Sci-Hub disruptive in a different way, there clearly seem to be rumblings in the scholarly publishing landscape. And, while some perceive the emergence of predatory publishers or Sci-Hub as existential threats to scholarship as we know it, these developments can also be regarded as bumps on the road to a new and improved future. We now have a higher-quality DOAJ and we have OASPA that is promoting beneficial guidelines; we now have the Think. Check. Submit. campaign to alert unsuspecting researchers to be careful about where they submit their articles; and we have guidelines from the ISSN Network about how to handle misleading or fraudulent publishers. All represent good progress on the road to a new and hoped-for better future. One might even conclude, as do many signs in the US alerting drivers to roads under construction, 'Temporary inconvenience, permanent improvement'!

> '"Temporary inconvenience, permanent improvement"'

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

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