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The Baffling Disappearance of Beall’s Blog (www.scholarlyoa.com):Reasons Revealed

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Abstract

*The substandard, low quality or predatory journals are the real threat to the publishing industry. It is a challenge to the quality and ethics of publication. The problem grabs the attention of scholarly community when the publisher of an open access journal **Gunther Eysenbach**, identified a black sheep among open access publishers and journals, since then many experiments were conducted to identify the black sheep and guidelines were issued to avoid them. However, the most substantial work in the field of predatory publishing was performed by Jeffery Beall who came up with a blacklist of predatory OA publishers and journal. For several years since the publishing of the Beall’s list, there has been increasing concerns about the criteria that Beall used to develop his lists, with some scholars dismissing his lists as inaccurate, misleading and dangerous to academics. The paper is a discourse on the 56 characteristics list by Beall as guidelines for Determining Predatory Open-Access Publishers and journals with a focusing on the factors which can be considered as Irrational Factors for labeling a journal as predatory. The irrational factor included in his criteria could be a strong reason for dismissal of the list and the criteria by the experts worldwide.*

Keywords: Predatory Journals, Beall’s List, Predatory Publishing., Scholarly communication

Introduction

Scholarly publishing scams and **predatory journals** have polluted science with substandard data, unreliable information and invalidated publications. The term “predatory OA publishers and journals” was coined by University of Colorado librarian, **Jeffrey Beall**. These journals recruit articles through aggressive marketing and spam emails, promising quick review and open access publication for a price with no quality control and virtually no transparency about processes and fees (**Beall, 2016**). Their main victims are institutions and researchers in low and middle income countries. Predatory publishing is a relatively recent phenomenon that seems to be exploiting some key features of the open access publishing model. It is sustained by collecting APCs that

are far less than those found in presumably legitimate open access journals and which are not always apparent to authors prior to article submission. Such list of potentially, possibly, or probably predatory, journals was first maintained by Beall. Their status is determined by a single person (Jeffrey Beall), against a set of evolving criteria (in its 3rd edition at the time of writing) that Beall has based largely on The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) Code of Conduct for Journal Editors and membership criteria of the Open Access Scholarly Publisher's Association (**Shamseer, 2017**). The bogus, misleading, misinterpreted and pay and publish model was reported by *Jeffrey Beall*, who coined and introduced the term “predatory publishing” in 2010 to the academic world for the first time. In the same year, he published the first list of predatory publishers on his blog. Beall created the register to monitor dubious journals. Since the Beall's lists were appreciated and used by the academic community at large, Beall started a new blog in 2012, updating his posts almost every day. The list reported 20 predatory publishers and the number increased with every passing day until early 2017, known widely as “Beall’ *List of Predatory Publishers* and in full as *Potential, Possible, or Probable Predatory Scholarly Open-Access Publishers*. He also listed journals: *Potential, Possible, or Probable Predatory Scholarly Open-Access Journals, Hijacked Journals, and Misleading Metrics*”. Beall also adopted advice and recommendation through the blog’s comments section. However, Beall’s list which was once considered as bible for identification of predatory outlets faced a lot of criticism. Many academics are disfavoring the Beall’s approach to non-Western, non-English speaking and developing countries. **Jones (2015)** accused him of being classist, derogatory or even racist. **Smith (2017)** warns that “the use of predatory as an umbrella term for all kinds of abuses hides the difference between practices that really are ruthlessly exploitative and those that may well grow out of mere inexperience or lack of competence”. This has led to conflation of all kinds of practices, and confusion relating to scholarship in general. The term “predatory” has been used loosely and in an undisciplined manner, rendering Beall’s list unhelpful or even questionable. Many publishers have objected to their works being targeted by Beall’s. In 2015, critics objected strongly to Beall’s blacklisting of Frontiers Publishers (**Bloudoff-Indelicato, 2015**). WAME cautions “against the use of prior appearance on Beall’s list as the solitary method for determining whether a journal is predatory or legitimate”.

Objectives

- To study the factors incorporated in Beall’s criteria to declare a journal as Potential predatory
- To decipher the context of each factor
- To identify unrealistic factors in Beall’s Criteria for quality assessment of a journal.

1.1 Origin and Growth of Predatory Journals

Today the OA domain is in problematic situation because of poor quality research and large number of predatory journals (**Bohannon, 2013**). The word ‘Predatory’ is a biological term defined by MerriamWebster dictionary as inclined or intended to injure or exploit others for personal gain or profit. The term ‘Predatory Publisher’ was first coined by Jeffrey Beall in 2010 (**Beall, 2013a**). According to Jeffrey Beall, “Predatory open-access publishers are those that who exploit unprofessionally the author-pays model of publishing (Gold OA) for their own profit. These publishers typically have a low article acceptance threshold, with a false-front or non-existent peer review process. They use deception to appear legitimate, entrapping researchers in submitting their work and then charging them to publish it”. Beall published his first list of predatory publishers on his blog in 2010, but it did not draw any attention of public. In 2011, he published a second list of predatory publishers that garnered much attention (**Beall, 2013b**). Later in early 2012, he updated his old blog and changed its name to Scholarly OA (<http://scholarlyoa.com>). In his blog, he divided them into two groups of publishing; one was a list of publishers (**Beall, 2017**) and other was a list of stand-alone journals. The list covers over one thousand entries (till the end of 2016) that covers some misleading metrics (**Beall, 2017**) and hijack journals included after 2013.

Table 1. Beall’s list of predatory journals, 2010-2017

Duration No. of	No. of Publishers	No. of Standardalone Journals	No. of Hijacked Journals	Misleading Metrics
2010-11	18	-	-	-
2011-12	23	-	-	-
2012-13	225	126	-	-
2013-14	477	303	-	-
2014-15	693	507	30	26
2015-16	923	882	101	28
2016-2017 (Jan 14)	1155	1294	115	53

The above table 1 shows the exponential growth rate of predatory journals. Beall had identified 18 predatory publishers in the year 2010-2011 which reached to 1155 journals by Jan 14, 2017. In the case of stand-alone journals, the number was 126 in 2012-13 but reached to 1294 by January 2017. Both hijacked journals and misleading metrics entered into the publishing field in 2014-15 and multiplied to 115 and 53 respectively. The number of articles published by predatory journals increased from 53,000 in 2010 to about 420,000 in 2014, covered by 8,000 journals (McCook, 2017).

1.2 Jeffrey Beall’s Criteria for Determining Predatory Open-Access Publishers

The launch of blog about the nuisance of fake publishing by Jeffrey Beall resulted in the wide spread awareness and concern about the problem. Soon after the launch of the blog researchers, scientists and librarians took Beall’s word as gospel. Further, hundreds of studies are based on Beall’s list and the findings have affected the policy and administrative decisions. Thus, before accepting the criteria as a gospel for identification of predatory outlets it is necessary to critically analyze the criteria. Beall’s criteria (2nd edition) published in 2015 is a negative criteria. “The Criteria fall into 2 major groups primary Criteria (Table 2) and secondary criteria (Table 3).” However the primary criteria are divided into four sub-groups via; *Editor and Staff, Business management, the publisher, Integrity and others*. Primary Criteria consists of twenty eight factors and twenty three factors are listed under Secondary Criteria. “To be found guilty one of the Primary Criteria will get a publisher on Beall’s list”. However, the Secondary Criteria are introduced with the following statement. “*The following practices are considered to be reflective of poor journal standards and, while they do not equal predatory criteria, potential authors should give due consideration to these items*” (Beall, 2015).” It is worth to notice that in the introductory section of the blog Beall has accepted under each discussion that “*All comments are subject to moderation, including removal*”.

Table 2: “Primary criteria for Determining Predatory Open-Access Publishers”

Editor and Staff (9)		
The publisher’s owner is identified as the editor of each and every journal published by the organization.	No single individual is identified as any specific journal’s editor.	The journal does not identify a formal editorial / review board.

No academic information is provided regarding the editor, editorial staff, and/or review board members (e.g., institutional affiliation).	Evidence exists showing that the editor and/or review board members do not possess academic expertise to reasonably qualify them to be publication gatekeepers in the journal's field.	Two or more journals have duplicate editorial boards (i.e., same editorial board for more than one journal).
The journals have an insufficient number of board members, have concocted editorial boards, name scholars on their editorial board without their knowledge or permission or have board members who are Prominent researchers but exempt them from any contributions to the journal except the use of their names and/or photographs.	The editorial board engages in gender bias (i.e., exclusion of any female members).	There is little or no geographical diversity among the editorial board members, especially for journals that claim to be international in scope or coverage.
Business management, The publisher...(6)		
Demonstrates a lack of transparency in publishing operations.	Has no policy or practices for digital preservation.	Begins operations with a large fleet of journals, often using a common template to quickly create each journal's home page
Provides insufficient information or hides information about author fees, offering to publish an author's paper and later sending an unanticipated "surprise" invoice.	Does not allow search engines to crawl the published content, preventing the content from being indexed in academic indexes.	Copy-proofs (locks) their PDFs, thus making it harder to check for plagiarism.
Integrity (7)		
The name of a journal is incongruent with the journal's mission.	The name of a journal does not adequately reflect its origin (e.g., a journal with the word "Canadian" or "Swiss" in its name when neither the publisher, editor, nor any purported institutional affiliate relates whatsoever to Canada or Switzerland).	In its spam email or on its website, the publisher falsely claims one or more of its journals have actual (Thomson-Reuters) impact factors, or advertises impact factors assigned by fake "impact factor" services, or it uses some made up measure (e.g., view factor), feigning/claiming an exaggerated international standing.
The publisher sends spam requests for peer reviews to scholars unqualified to review submitted manuscripts, in the sense that the specialties of the invited reviewers do not match the papers sent to them.	The publisher falsely claims to have its content indexed in legitimate abstracting and indexing services or claims that its content is indexed in resources that are not abstracting and indexing services.	The publisher dedicates insufficient resources to preventing and eliminating author misconduct, to the extent that the journal or journals suffer from repeated cases of plagiarism, self-plagiarism, image manipulation, and the like
The publisher asks the corresponding author for suggested reviewers and the publisher subsequently uses the suggested reviewers without sufficiently vetting their qualifications or authenticity.		
Other (6)		
Re-publish papers already published in other venues/outlets without providing appropriate credits.	Use boastful language claiming to be a "leading publisher" even though the publisher may only be a startup or a novice organization.	Operate in a Western country chiefly for the purpose of functioning as a vanity press for scholars in a developing country (e.g., utilizing a mail drop address or PO box address in the United States, while actually operating from a developing country).

Provide minimal or no copyediting or proofreading of submissions	Publish papers that are not academic at all, e.g. essays by lay people, polemical editorials, or obvious pseudo-science.	Have a “contact us” page that only includes a web form or an email address, and the publisher hides or does not reveal its location.
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Table 2 lists the criteria and framework proposed by Beall for investigating scholarly and scientific open-access journals and publishers. Beall divided the whole criteria under “Primary Criteria (28) which includes Editor and Staff (9), Business Management (6), Integrity (7), Other Criteria (6) and, Secondary Criteria (23)”. Each heading in the primary criteria lists the factors considered as predatory by Beall. He believes that the presence of the factor affects the quality of publication. However, some of the factors listed by Beall needs reconsideration before a publisher or a journal are labeled as predatory. The factors in table 1 labeled red are considered as Irrational Factors by the author. Each considered irrational factor is supported with an argument and are discussed below.

While analyzing the first criteria listed under *Editor and Staff* which states, ***“The publisher’s owner is identified as the editor of all the journals published by the organization”*** (Beall, 2015). Beall consider having same editor for many journals as one of factor to consider a journal as predatory. The argument against the statement could be even if there is a single person at the helm of a publishing, it cannot be consider as wrong if the publishing activities are carried out following recommended publication standards and ethical guidelines. The next questionable factor is ***“Two or more journals have duplicate editorial boards (i.e., same editorial board for more than one journal)”*** Beall (2012b). Although the assessment is logical, but it is neither reflect any predatory characteristics nor is necessarily true. For example, two journals one about Scientometrics and another about Research metrics are published by a publisher. There is probability of having similar or overlapping editorial boards. “Certainly, it is not a predatory characteristic”, since both the journal requires similar expertise and more importantly if the editors have agreed to the condition while informed of this decision by the publisher. The next criteria in table 4 i.e. ***“The editorial board engages in gender bias (i.e., exclusion of any female members)”*** (Beall, 2012b) is absolutely not a reason to believe it is a scummy signs of a publication. It is not always a deliberate act to keep females out of the editorial boards. Sometimes it might happen that female as experts may not be available or they may not be willing to join the editorial board. While observing the next assessment ***“Demonstrate a lack of***

transparency in its operations” (Beall 2012b) the use of term transparency is vague, broad and difficult to ascertain and not easy to quantify in the wide and diversified publishing industry. Next, Beall has considered *“Begin operations with a large fleet of journals, often using a template to quickly create each journal's home page.” (Beall , 2012b)* as a predatory factor. It is illogical to believe that a publisher cannot handle large number journals. Moreover, start-up publishers can reduce staff, save time and cost by using OA template banks for conducting the publishing operation. The next argument is against the factor listed under integrity. **Beall (2015)** viewed the factor *“Operate in a Western country chiefly for the purpose of functioning as a vanity press for scholars in a developing country.”* The assessment cannot be accepted as a predatory factor. It challenges the valid efforts of foreign nationals, conducting fair publication practices in developing countries. Further, all publishers from developing nations are not frauds and not all vanity publishers conduct fraudulent activities. The next issue raised by **Beall (2015)** was about *“Publish papers that are pseudo-science.” and “Publish papers that are not academic at all, e.g. essays by laypeople”*. The factor is challenged since the term used psedo-science is vague. Beall also viewed **“contact us page that only includes a web form or an email address”** as a predatory factor. However, the concern of scientific community and public could be addressed using web from as a convenient way of addressing the issue. Further “this is not a problem provided that the incoming requests posted through that web form are fully responded to and the response is delivered on timely basis”. The next parameter is also misdirected which states *“When an author submits a paper, the publisher asks the corresponding author for suggested reviewers. Then the publisher uses the suggested reviewers without sufficiently checking their qualifications. This allows authors to create fake online identities and review their own papers” (Beall, 2015)*. It is not the predatory factor of the publisher if an author creates fake online identities to self-review the paper. “It appears rather to be related to the ethical nature of the author, i.e., it is misdirected parameter, incorrectly associated with publisher predation.”

Table 3 lists the secondary criteria proposed by Beall. He warns authors about the signs which reflect the poor journal standards. Presence of the any of the secondary factor in a journal does not make it predatory. However, Beall warns, that “the potential authors should give due consideration to these items”.

Table 3: Secondary criteria reflecting Poor journal standards/practice

1. The publisher copies “authors guidelines” verbatim (or with minor editing) from other publishers.	2. The publisher publishes journals that combine two or more fields not normally treated together (e.g., International Journal of Business, Humanities and Technology).	3. The publisher publishes journals that are excessively broad (e.g., Journal of Education) in order to attract more articles and gain more revenue from author fees.	4. The publisher copies or egregiously mimics journal titles from other publishers.
5. The publisher lists insufficient contact information, including contact information that does not clearly state the headquarters location or misrepresents the headquarters location (e.g., through the use of addresses that are actually mail drops).	6. The publisher charges authors for publishing but requires transfer of copyright and retains copyright on journal content. Or the publisher requires the copyright transfer upon submission of manuscript.	7. The publisher has poorly maintained websites, including dead links, prominent misspellings and grammatical errors on the website.	8. The publisher includes text on its website that describes the open access movement and then foists the publisher as if the publisher is active in fulfilling the movement’s values and goals.
9. The publisher makes unauthorized use of licensed images on their website, taken from the open web, without permission or licensing from the copyright owners.	10. The publisher engages in excessive use of spam email to solicit manuscripts or editorial board memberships.	11. The publishers' officers use email addresses that end in .gmail.com, yahoo.com, or some other free email supplier.	12. None of the members of a particular journal's editorial board have ever published an article in the journal.
13. The publisher fails to state licensing policy information on articles or shows lack of understanding of well-known OA journal article licensing standards, or provides contradictory licensing information.	14. The publisher lacks a published article retraction policy or retracts articles without a formal statement (stealth retractions); also the publisher does not publish corrections or clarifications and does not have a policy for these issues.	15. The publisher does not use standard identifiers such as ISSNs or DOIs or uses them improperly.	16. There is little or no geographic diversity among the authors of articles in one or more of the publisher's journals, an indication the journal has become an easy outlet for authors from one country or region to get scholarly publications.
17. For the name of the publisher, the publisher uses names such as Network, Center, association, Institute, and the like when it is only a solitary, proprietary operation and does not meet the definition of the term used or implied non-profit mission.	18. The publisher has excessive, cluttered advertising on its site to the extent that it interferes with site navigation and content access. .	19. The publisher has no membership in industry associations and/or intentionally fails to follow industry standards	20. The publisher has an optional "fast-track" fee-based service for expedited peer review which appears to provide assured publication with little or no vetting.
21. The publisher includes links to legitimate conferences & associations on its main website, as if to borrow from other organizations’ legitimacy, and emblazon the new publisher with the others’ legacy value.	22. The publisher displays prominent statements that promise rapid publication and/or unusually quick peer review.	23. Evidence exists showing that the publisher does not really conduct a bona fide peer review.	24. The publisher or its journals are not listed in standard periodical directories or are not widely cataloged in library databases.
25. The publisher appears to focus exclusively on article processing fee procurement, while not providing services for readers, or on billing for fees, while abdicating any effort at vetting submissions.	26. The publisher creates a publishing operation that demonstrates rapacious behavior that rises to level of sheer greed. The individual might have business administration experience, and the site may even have business journals, but the owner seems oblivious to business ethics.		

There are several aspects under secondary criteria listed in table 3 which need reconsideration and critical analysis. It is debatable to consider 3rd factor which debates about, *having a broad*

title as a reflection of poor journal quality, for example, some of the leading science journals such as Science or Nature have extremely broad titles, yet those publishers are not considered as low quality or values. The next important issue is about discussed under factor six in the table. Since transfer of copyright from author to publisher is a method to obtain a document and it gives legal right to publisher to “defend the use or to counter its abuse”. Even if a publisher publishes papers or journals as OA , “it can request a transfer of copyright without, in any way, affecting the OA nature of the paper. The OA nature of a paper does not depend on, nor is restricted by the use or presence of a Creative Commons (CC) license”. Thus, the factor could not be accepted as a final word. The next point raised by Beall is about "***having no membership in industry associations and does not follow industry standards.***" The factor could be opposed on the basis of following reasons. Firstly, “what are these industry standards and where they can be found?” Are they same in the different nations. Thus the term is evidently not pertinent to the global scenario. Secondly, “being a member does not necessarily imply that any publishing codes of conduct are being followed”. Conversely, “to claim that just because a publisher is not part of such an association is clearly erroneous because many publishers publish well, with good standards and ethics without being part of an association”. The next erroneous factor listed by Beall is presented under **point 21** in the table. Where Beall is of the opinion that if a journal “***Provide links to legitimate conferences and associations on the publisher's main website in order to steal some of the organizations' legitimacy and paint the publisher with it.***” (Beall, 2012a). If a journal is thematically related to an academic conference it can prove as an extremely positive point provided a proper consent from the conference organizer is being sought. However, “the posting of a conference logo or link to a journal or publisher’s website without formal permission is a scummy sign”. The next debatable statement under secondary criteria is, “***For the name of the publisher, use names like Network, Center, Association, Institute, etc. when it is only a publisher and does not meet the definition of the term used.***” (Beall, 2012a). Since attachment of such terms with the name of the publication represents “a valid way of organizing a publishing structure that would allow for efficient management of the entire publishing process. In fact, many academic journals are started precisely by Institutes”. Thus, label a publisher predatory because of its use of one of these four words is absurd. Further, analyzing factor 5 stated in the table as “***The publisher lists insufficient contact information, including contact information that does not clearly state the headquarters location or misrepresents the headquarters location***”. Inclusion of foreign country’s name in a publisher or

journal title could not and is not justifiable to list a journal or publisher as predatory. The next assertion of Beall states “ *and on getting their fees at the expense of readers, and offers few or no value adds to readers such as RSS feeds, hot-linked references, etc.*” (Beall, 2012a). The assessment cannot be considered as relevant factor to deem a publication as predatory. In the assessment Beall refers to asking for Article processing charges (APC) from the Authors rather than charging access charges from the readers. However many reputed publishers are also following the model for Charging APC. Thus charging APC does not make a publication a predatory provided it is following reasonable journal publication standards.

Conclusion

Beall blog had reached both fame and infamy. Beall’s fame rose among an increasingly aggressive anti- POAJ (predatory open access journals movement) that was not shy to be highly critical in public of publishers on those lists, while infamy spread among an increasingly large crowd of academics. These academics were sometimes culturally profiled, and felt unfairly labeled and criticized, in some cases without recourse to challenge their inclusion on those lists. These polar forces would only lead to increased tensions and conflicts. And indeed, on January 15, 2017, the Beall blog suddenly went blank, so some event must have taken place, or a series of cumulative stresses, still unknown to the wider public, must have occurred. Despite formal requests to Beall and the University of Colorado to explain his actions to the public, these requests have been met with silence. However, incorporation of irrelevant factors presented in the work could be considered as responsible factors for dismal its reputation keeping into consideration the level of irrationality.

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