

# Predatory Publishers Threaten to Erode Scholarly Communication

**Jeffrey Beall**

Predatory open-access (OA) publishers—the ones that exploit the gold (author-pays) publishing model for their own profit—threaten the reputation of rigorously peer-reviewed OA journals. Many OA advocates singularly champion the open licensing of scholarly works but largely ignore the emerging serious quality issues. The result is an ever-increasing number of low-quality and even corrupt publishers, many of whom self-identify as noble for merely functioning as OA publishers—an identification that far too many OA advocates support.

The trend of increasing numbers of predatory OA publishers gives the regrettable impression that the quality aspects of scholarly publishing are diminishing. For example, one major OA publisher is stealthily doing away with journal editors, leaving accept–reject decisions to its staff members. Author misconduct is increasing, especially in non-Western countries. The continuing financial crisis has made governments worldwide demand more accountability on the part of the colleges and universities that they fund or subsidize. Accordingly, the schools are increasingly called on to demonstrate a return on investment, and quantifying faculty publications is a common method of making the return evident. In turn, that increases pressure on faculty to publish, so many hurriedly write or copy publications that the growing predatory publishing market is more than eager to accept and publish for a fee.

In contrast, if you are an honest and conscientious editor of a science journal, all the plagiarism and all the OA corruption

might have a silver lining. It is probable that over time the editors and publishers who care about publishing ethics and about following industry standards will be increasingly valued for the good work that they do. The corruption of the predatory publishers will compel academe to assign greater value to the honest publishers, their editors, and their publications.

## The Editor-in-Chief: A Diminishing Presence?

Hindawi Publishing Corporation is an example of a successful OA publisher. I do not classify it as a predatory publisher, but it is valuable to examine Hindawi as a case study of where OA publishing might be taking the scholarly publishing industry. Hindawi publishes 444 journals spread among five brands. The brands include the original Hindawi journals, the incongruously named International Scholarly Research Network (which is not a network in the usual sense of the word), Case Reports in Medicine, Conference Papers in Science, and Dataset Papers in Science. Hindawi is an OA publisher and charges about US \$1,000 as the article-processing fee per accepted paper. The publisher relies on e-mail as its chief method of soliciting editorial board memberships and manuscripts.

One of the controversial aspects of Hindawi's peer-review process is that its journals do not have editors-in-chief. Instead, editorial duties are carried out by staff members at the company's headquarters in Cairo.<sup>1</sup> Contributing to Hindawi's success is the combination of Egypt's very high unemployment rate and a well-educated middle class. Hindawi has much lower labor costs than most publishers. Indeed, Hindawi is very profitable. In a September 2012 interview, the company's owner, Ahmed Hindawi, stated that “our results for the first half of 2012 show revenues of \$6.3 million with a net profit of \$3.3 million.”<sup>2</sup>

That means that Hindawi's profit margin, at least for that period, was 52%, much higher than Reed Elsevier's 36%.<sup>3</sup>

Science editors and the scientific community alike ought to be concerned that the editor-free Hindawi model will spread throughout the industry, not only because of the potential loss of positions but because of what it will mean for learned publishing itself. Reading CSE's *White Paper on Promoting Integrity in Scientific Journal Publications, 2012 Update*, I see a long section called “Editor roles and responsibilities”.<sup>4</sup> Reading that section raises the questions of who will be covering all those roles in journals that lack editors and whether the responsibilities will be met at all. One of the main qualities that may separate high-quality journals from vanity-press journals is competent editorship, including editors-in-chief and manuscript editors. Among the predatory publishers that I observe and track, most purport to have editors-in-chief and editorial boards, but in many cases the editors are honorary or the editorial board members' names are added without their permission or knowledge or are even made up. Among those publishers, it is easy to observe the effects of the lack of editorial oversight. Papers are poorly edited or not edited at all, peer review is obviously not carried out, and the many variations of author misconduct, especially plagiarism, are evident in the papers published.

The poor editing and author misconduct bring into question the suitability of gold OA as a model for financing scholarly publishing. The model focuses on pleasing the authors rather than the readers because the authors pay the bills. Authors want their works to be reviewed and published quickly, and they want to submit their papers to a journal that offers them a good chance of being accepted—a strategy that saves time by avoiding the need for multiple submissions. The predatory publishers know that and

JEFFREY BEALL is the scholarly initiatives librarian at the Auraria Library at the University of Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

tailor their business practices to offer what their customers, the authors, want. They are extremely good at exploiting the naiveté of junior faculty and graduate students.

### Author Misconduct

The publishers are not the only players in the OA movement that are “gaming” the system. I observe almost daily acts of author misconduct in predatory publishers' journals. Most of what I see involves piracy in the form of outright plagiarism or self-plagiarism. It is not uncommon for authors to use a previously published paper as a template for a new paper that they are writing. In doing so, they change some of the words but keep the earlier article's structure. When I document such plagiarism in e-mails to predatory publishers, I get a variety of reactions. Some ignore the message. Others quietly remove the article without printing a retraction statement.

It is clear that there is intense pressure to publish, especially in the developing world, and that the predatory publishers are merely meeting the need that the pressure is creating. A correspondent in Tamil Nadu, India, recently wrote that “our fellows have started to publish quick papers in the journals published by these people, as a force by institute to produce more output. After looking at your website, I have fear that our people [are] falling prey to such journals” (2012 e-mail from HN Kumara to me). The institutes grant more credit for work published in international than national jour-


nals, and this results in a surfeit of recently launched journals whose titles begin with “International Journal of . . .”.

### The Future

Divisions among OA advocates have worsened the problems surrounding the adoption of OA as a distribution model: some fight for green (author self-archived) OA, and others for gold. Any questioning of the OA model generally attracts sharp and personal criticism. Some advocates seem more concerned with shutting down commercial publishers than with opening up access to scholarly research.

The number of predatory publishers is exploding, especially in South Asia. The word is out: you can make easy money by setting up a scholarly publishing Web site and accepting payments to publish fourth-rate articles. Never before has it been so easy to set up and start a scholarly publishing operation. Numerous templates exist, and the Public Knowledge Project's Open Journal Systems open-source software is being used by many corrupt publishers as their journal publishing platform.

At the end of the day, all those questionable publishing practices could be good news for the traditional scholarly publishers and for OA publishers who strive to add value to research by following rigorous editorial and scholarly-publishing industry standards. High-quality research publications will become more valued in an academe filled with rubbish articles.

Recommender systems will be developed that filter out low-quality and questionable research and favor research published under the careful scrutiny of a well-qualified editor-in-chief. Social-media tools as applied to scholarly publishing will help to separate the high-quality works from the low-quality ones, and new metrics will confirm the value of well-edited journals. In the meantime, however, we all need to advance our scientific literacy, which now must include the ability to detect and avoid scholarly publishing scams.<sup>5</sup> 

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**CSE's White Paper on Promoting Integrity  
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