



Corrupt and Questionable Practices in the Scholarly Publishing Industry

By Jeffrey Beall, MS, MSLS
Associate Professor, Scholarly Communications Librarian
Auraria Library, University of Colorado Denver

In an article in the February issue of *EON*, I described predatory publishers, those exploiting the Gold Open Access (OA) model of scholarly publishing by charging for inadequate or nonexistent publishing services. Regrettably, there are additional, related scams and questionable practices to report. These include contrived or bogus scholarly metrics and journal hijackings. Another questionable practice involves luring scholarly authors into purchasing publicity services that advertise research.

With the implementation of the Gold OA model, in which authors are charged fees (article processing charges) upon acceptance of manuscripts, scholarly authors are increasingly taking on the role of customer. Payments from scholarly authors are becoming commonplace and are leading to the creation of new services benefitting authors. However, given the intense pressure for academics to publish, the role of merit may be decreasing in scholarly publishing, and the role of money may be increasing. As monetary transactions between scholarly authors and author services companies increase, authors with funds to buy these services will often be the ones achieving the most success in their publishing.

Misleading Metrics

The Allure of an Impact Factor

Predatory publishers understand that scholarly authors prefer to submit their work to respected journals that have earned favorable metrics, including the Journal Impact Factor (IF), a product of Thomson Reuters that appears in their proprietary Journal Citation Reports. Many universities require or prefer that their faculty publish articles in scholarly journals with IFs to earn promotion and tenure. In some universities, the awarding of a PhD is contingent upon the candidate having published one or more articles in a journal with a legitimate IF. The same is true in some countries

for promotion to associate or full professor. One example is Kazakhstan, where to become an associate professor, one must, among meeting other requirements, publish the following according to the Ministry of Education and Sciences¹:

- not less than fourteen (14) scientific papers on the requested specialty published after defending a thesis, including:
- not less than ten (10) in the publications recommended by the Committee,
- not less than two (2) in international scientific journals, having according to the knowledge base of Thomson Reuters (ISI Web of Knowledge, Thomson Reuters) nonzero impact factor;
- not less than two (2) reports of foreign materials in the international conferences.

So, to attract more authors and therefore more revenue, Gold OA publishers aspire to publish journals with IFs. However, it can take many years for a journal to earn an IF, and eligibility requires that publishers follow ethical and scholarly publishing industry standards. Accordingly, few predatory journals ever earn a bona fide IF from Thomson Reuters.

But because honest IFs are out of the reach of most predatory publishers' journals, a cottage

1 Kazakhstan Ministry of Education and Science. (2011). Правила присвоения ученых званий (ассоциированный профессор (доцент), профессор). [Terms of conferring academic ranks (associate professor (assistant professor), professor)]. Retrieved from: <http://control.edu.gov.kz/ru/node/3063>; translated using Google Translate.

industry of IF providers has arisen to meet this need, and many questionable publishers are taking advantage of the services. On my blog Scholarly Open Access, I've identified around 20 companies that supply IFs on demand for any publisher willing to pay for them.² A few of the companies claim that the IFs they assign are genuinely calculated using citation data, but I suspect that in most cases they are just made up. The assigned values typically increase over time, which is not always true for journals with authentic IFs.

The bogus IF companies use business names that sound legitimate, a tactic also employed by predatory publishers. Some of the company names they use abbreviate to ISI, which is also the name of the Institute for Scientific Information, the organization that originally began assigning IFs to scholarly journals 50 years ago.

Born with Impact Factors

The IF is determined by calculating the average number of citations to citable articles in a journal over a rolling, two-year time frame. New values are calculated and assigned yearly, using bibliometric data from the previous two years. So, theoretically, the earliest a journal could receive an IF is three years after it commenced publishing, though this occurs only rarely. In most cases, the time between launch of a journal and the assignment of its first IF is longer. However, most of the bogus IF companies assign so-called IFs to journals much earlier. The journals then use the metrics in their spam email and on their websites to attract manuscript submissions. In some cases, these publishers do not specify the source of the IF and simply state the term "impact factor" followed by the value, for example, "Impact Factor 0.825."

There are also a few journals that calculate their own IFs. To avoid criticism that they are assigning a bogus metric, they may invent a term such as "impact index" to name their self-calculated metric. Some calculate the metric by using Google Scholar to document the number of times their articles have been cited, but unlike the Thomson Reuters

databases, Google Scholar aims to be comprehensive and is filled with low-quality publications.

Misleading metrics are problematic because researchers may be duped into thinking they are legitimate IFs. The researchers will then report to their universities that they have published in an IF journal when in fact they have not. Also, these counterfeit metrics impair the value of the authentic IF, which scholars and others can use to assess the relative impact of journals within a given field. Finally, the use of these bogus metrics signals bad faith on the part of the publishers who advertise them on their websites and in their emails.

Hijacked Journals

Journal hijackings occur when someone creates a website that purports to be the principal website for a particular scholarly journal but is in actuality a counterfeit website. Typically, the purpose of hijacked journals is to create fast and easy revenue for the hijacker. The journal hijackers will advertise the journal as one using the Gold OA model. The counterfeit journal then spams scholarly authors seeking submissions. Generally, most submitted manuscripts are "accepted" and the authors are levied an article processing charge. Acceptance is easy and fast, allowing the hijackers to make a quick and easy profit.

I publish a list of hijacked journals on my blog.³ The list has two columns, one listing the original journal and the other listing the hijacked counterpart. To maximize submissions, the hijackers prefer to target publications bearing IFs, exploiting the need of scholars to publish in these journals. In a few cases, the hijackers have created the first-ever websites for the journals, as there are some scholarly journals that are published in print only and that do not have any online presence. Also, in a few cases the hijackers have targeted what librarians refer to as monographic series, books that are published in a named and numbered series. Occasionally such series are able to earn IFs just as other periodicals do.

In some cases, publishers of the victimized journals are aware of the hijackings and alert their

2 Beall, J. (n.d.). Misleading metrics. Retrieved from: <http://scholarlyoa.com/other-pages/misleading-metrics/>

3 Beall, J. (n.d.). Hijacked journals. Retrieved from: <http://scholarlyoa.com/other-pages/hijacked-journals/>

readers to them. One example is the South African journal *Bothalia*, which includes the following warning on its website⁴:

ALERT: A bogus/fake journal website operates on <http://www.bothalia.com>. Readers, authors and reviewers should be aware that we are not associated with this website. Do not submit your work to <http://www.bothalia.com> as it is a predatory publisher.

The journal hijackers generally do not target Western scholars in their spam email campaigns promoting the hijacked journals. Instead, they focus on regions where there are fewer publishing opportunities and where scholarly publishing is particularly competitive, such as the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Scholars need to be aware of journal hijackings. A good way to avoid being victimized by them is to ignore spam email solicitations from unfamiliar journals.

Research Promotion Companies

As scholarly authors are increasingly finding themselves in the role of customer, more and more companies are seeking to provide services and generate revenue from them. New author-related services are appearing, services that may help authors excel in the increasingly competitive world of scholarly research and communication.

One type of new service is research promotion. Companies exist that provide fee-based services to promote the research of individual authors or teams of authors, such as a group of scientists from a particular lab. For a fee, these companies will create text and images highlighting the research of a particular scientist or lab, publishing the story on a website or in a glossy magazine.

It is important to separate out these companies from the ones described earlier in this article. The companies that publish counterfeit IFs and the publishers that use them, along with the journal hijackers, are all engaged in highly questionable

if not fraudulent activities. Those providing research promotion services, on the other hand, are not doing anything illegal. Here the question is not whether the services are fraudulent or not; it is whether it is wise for scholarly authors to pay others to advertise and otherwise promote their research.

While the work of research promotion is not fraudulent, the methods for advertising it may be. Several of the companies involved in this activity extensively use spam email to promote their services to authors. I've documented their practices on my blog.⁵ In their spam emails, some of the companies act as if they are journalists wishing to report on a scientist's research. Only later in the process does the scientist learn that the promotional articles the company writes have a price, quite literally. One company charges \$3,000 for each publicity story it writes and publishes. It is possible that the use of these companies' services may backfire on the scientists who use them, for paying to advertise one's research may carry a stigma. Good research promotes itself, and glossy magazine articles are poor substitutes for traditional measures of successful research, namely citations in scholarly works.

Conclusion

Scholarly authors are increasingly taking on the role of customer in the overall scholarly communication process. The Gold (author pays) OA model has perhaps inspired other companies to market their services directly to authors. Accordingly, we have seen the emergence of predatory publishers. In turn, bogus metrics companies have emerged that sell counterfeit metrics to these publishers, metrics that may help lure authors into submitting their manuscripts.

A fraudulent version of Gold OA publishing, hijacked journals, has also emerged. These counterfeit journals mimic the websites of authentic journals or create websites for print-only

4 AOSIS Open Journals. (2014). *Bothalia: African biodiversity & Conservation*. Retrieved from: www.abcjournal.org/index.php/ABC

5 Beall, J. (2013, March 12). Beware of spam email with offers to promote your research [Blog post]. Retrieved from: <http://scholarlyoa.com/2013/03/12/beware-of-spam-email-with-offers-to-promote-your-research/>

journals and then solicit submissions from unwary authors, accepting virtually all of them and pocketing the article processing charges. Finally, several companies provide fee-based research promotion services for researchers or research

teams. Scholarly authors should be aware of scams in the scholarly publishing industry and should use fee-based services only after having gained assurance that the companies they patronize and the services they offer are legitimate.