Persistence of Predatory Publishing

By Marydee Ojala
How exciting! You’ve just received an email recognizing your professional expertise and inviting you to submit an article about your research to a prestigious journal. Or perhaps it’s a friend, colleague, or researcher at your institution who is thrilled to receive an emailed invitation to publish and eager to share the good news with you.

Your excitement quickly dissipates as you begin to question the origin of the email. You hate to pour cold water on the excitement of your friend, colleague, or researcher, but you need to inject a word of caution into the general euphoria. As an information professional, you’re aware that predatory publishing is a growing phenomenon in the world of scholarly communications. You also know that predatory journals often have names just close enough to prestigious journals to trick you into thinking they are something they’re not. And you really wish Jeffrey Beall was still maintaining his list of predatory publishers.

BACKGROUND OF BEALL’S LIST

Jeffrey Beall is a librarian at the University of Colorado–Denver’s Auraria Library. He began Beall’s List in 2012, having become increasingly distressed about the number of spam emails he received inviting him to publish in questionable journals. His list of predatory journals and publishers expanded greatly during its 5 years of existence. He started the list under the aegis of his Scholarly OA blog (scholarlyoa.com), which he abruptly shut down in mid-January 2017. The list is archived (beallslist.weebly.com), and there is an attempt to keep it up-to-date, since an archived list loses value as time goes on. However, the person responsible for updating it has decided to be anonymous. Without knowing the qualifications of this individual, it’s difficult to evaluate the quality of the list.

Even when it was explicitly the work of Jeffrey Beall, some questioned its quality. As the work of one individual, untempered by an “editorial board” of his peers, it was inevitable that bias would creep in. Beall’s bias centered on open access (OA) journals. He distrusted them, to put it mildly. As Walt Crawford observes in his April 2014 *Cites & Insights* article (“Ethics and Access 1: The Sad Case of Jeffrey Beall,” citesandinsights.info/civ14i4.pdf), “He’s the one-man authority on predatory—but only predatory OA—publishing.” Crawford worried about Beall declaring the serials crisis to be over and his questioning the motives of OA supporters, implying they force researchers to publish in low-quality journals and inhibit freedom of the press.

Another charge leveled against Beall was that, in his zeal to unmask predatory publishers, he discriminated against those operating in the developing world and those trying to start a new journal. Not every journal emanating from outside North America and Europe is inherently publishing “junk science,” and any publisher starting a new journal lacks, by definition, a backfile. It requires researchers and information professionals to carefully evaluate individual journals and publishers to determine their predatory—or not—nature.

WHY BEALL’S LIST FOLDED

When Beall abruptly closed his website, speculation about his motivation ran high. Since he wasn’t talking, assumptions about the toll lawsuits were taking on him and the possible pressure put on him by his university were the frontrunners. He had been the subject of libel suits from several publishers, as documented by George H. Pike in his
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A response by Shea Swauger, head of researcher support services at the University of Colorado–Denver’s Auraria Library and Beall’s direct supervisor, appeared in College & Research Library News in November 2017 (crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/16837/18434). He disputes Beall’s contention that the university forced him into shutting down the list, “At no time did I pressure Beall to discontinue his work, or threaten his employment because of his work.” He characterizes predatory publishing as “an information literacy problem for which we currently have the knowledge and skills to address.”

The Chronicle of Higher Education’s Paul Basken theorized in September 2017 that librarians, a Swiss publisher, his university, and/or the broader academic community forced Beall’s hand. He didn’t rule out Beall himself, “who failed to recognize that a bit of online shaming wouldn’t stop many scientists from making common cause with journals that just don’t ask too many questions” (chronicle.com/article/Why-Beall-s-List-Died-/241171).

**SINCE BEALL’S LIST FOLDED**

Although Beall’s List folded, it had several salutary effects. It raised the awareness of unscrupulous publishers that pretend to peer-review articles, publish anything that comes their way, and charge unsuspecting researchers money that is wasted. In the process, it can destroy researcher reputations. It forced the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ; doaj.org) to re-examine its criteria for including titles in its directory and to invite publishers to reapply for inclusion.

*Online Searcher* article “Getting SLAPPed: Defamation and Your Blog” (May/June 2013, pp. 12–15). Stephen Luntz, writing on the IFLScience editors blog, thought the shutdown alarmed scientists (iflscience.com/editors-blog/web-site-that-tracked-fake-science-journals-has-suddenly-vanished), but acknowledged that Beall was sometimes “casting his net too wide.” Andrew Silver, writing in *Nature*, quoted the University of Denver as saying Beall’s decision was personal, not dictated to him by the university (“Controversial Website That Lists ‘Predatory’ Publishers Shuts Down”; nature.com/news/controversial-website-that-lists-predatory-publishers-shuts-down-1.21328).

In June 2017, Beall took to the pages of the Croatian Society of Medical Biochemistry and Laboratory Medicine’s journal *Biochemia Medica* to explain what predatory publishers taught him (biochemia-medica.com/system/files/27_2_J.Beall__What%20I%20learned%20from%20predatory%20publishers.pdf). He wrote, “What I learned from predatory publishers is that they consider money far more important than business ethics, research ethics, and publishing ethics and that these three pillars of scholarly publishing are easily sacrificed for profit.” He also put the blame for shutting down his site squarely on his university: “In January 2017, facing intense pressure from my employer, the University of Colorado Denver, and fearing for my job, I shut down the blog and removed all its content from the blog platform.” He also had some harsh words for his fellow librarians, whom he thought were unduly critical of him.
On the legal front, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) filed an injunction against OMICS Group Inc., iMedPub LLC, Conference Series LLC, and its CEO, director, and owner, Srinubabu Gedela, saying they “deceptively claim that their journals provide authors with rigorous peer review and have editorial boards made up of prominent academics when in fact, many articles are published with little to no peer review and many individuals represented to be editors have not agreed to be affiliated with the journals.” In its most recent press release (ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2017/11/ftc-halts-deceptive-practices-academic-journal-publishers), the FTC takes credit for halting deceptive practices of academic journal publishers.

**YOU'RE PUBLISHING WHERE?**

Back to that email. How would you know it’s from a predatory publisher? How would you convince your friend, colleague, or researcher of that? Let’s start with the salutation. If it’s addressed to #firstname# #lastname#, it’s a mass mailing, and a sloppy mass mailing at that. Some people are upset when the salutation is to Dr. or Professor and their correct name. The point of contention is that if the journal publishers really knew to whom they were addressing the invitation to publish, they’d also know you didn’t have a Ph.D. and weren’t on the faculty. However, in some cultures, the use of Dr. or professor is an honorific, so that’s not a completely accurate indication of unreliability. But it should trigger greater scrutiny of the publisher.

More telling are unrealistic quick turnaround times. A journal that tells you it is rigorously peer reviewed but promises publication within a week is a dubious place to publish. Worse is when the email totally gets your expertise wrong. I’ve been invited to publish as an expert in high energy physics and in poultry farming, neither of which I know anything about. A medical librarian received an email acknowledging the “eminence” of her research, citing a specific article, and inviting her to contribute to the journal. The cited article was a book review.

The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) has an excellent document, “Identifying Predatory or Pseudo-Journals,” on its website (wame.org/identifying-predatory-or-pseudo-journals). A quick web search for predatory publishers or for predatory journals reveals that a substantial number of academic libraries have published guides to help their students and faculty avoid publishing in suspect journals.

One result of the Beall’s List shutdown in the inauguration of Cabells Blacklist and Whitelist. Paul Blobaum’s review in this issue of Online Searcher fills you in on this new product.

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