

# Predatory Publishing: A Wake-up Call for Editors and Authors in the Middle East and Africa

## INTRODUCTION

The increasing worldwide availability of the Internet has made it possible for the free global availability of scientific journal articles online. Before this, readers can only get access to journals through their individual (personal or by society membership) or institutional (library) subscriptions to hard copies that get delivered periodically.<sup>[1]</sup> Soon after journals turning online, two main publishing models developed: the open-access (OA) and subscription-only access. Subscription-only journals depend on income from the subscription with or without advertising and consequently do not charge authors.<sup>[2]</sup> However, OA journals rely on charging the authors to cover their publishing expenses. The expansion of OA to the scientific literature came as a result of a recent revolution in scientific communication rejecting the publishers' limited rights of copyright. Indeed, it is a noble concept and is now required by an increasing number of funders and institutions. OA may be through OA scientific journals or by authors posting manuscripts of articles published in subscription journals in open web repositories.<sup>[1]</sup> The European Union and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development have argued for OA to scientific data for all publicly funded research in Europe by 2020 with a similar initiative through the Fair Access to Science and Technology Research Act in the USA.<sup>[2]</sup> The concept and practice of OA journalism have been severely damaged by a vicious attack of the so-called "predatory publishers." This editorial considers the concepts and practices of predatory publishing with a particular focus on the challenges in the Middle East and Africa.

## THE UNCOVERING OF PREDATORY PUBLISHING

In 2012, Beall, a scholarly librarian from the United States, launched a blog called "Scholarly Open Access" in which he listed what he called "predatory publishers and journals" and offered critical commentary on scholarly OA publishing.<sup>[3]</sup> Over the following 5 years, he has published extensively in many general and specialized journals on the threat of predatory journals to genuine OA journalism.<sup>[4-6]</sup> The black list of predatory journals on his blog formed the basis for much editorial research work and helped focus the professional opinion on this matter.<sup>[7,8]</sup> There has been a steady increase in the interest and concern of professionals and academics reflected in the relevant volume of work in the international literature [Table 1]. Criteria have now been developed for identification of predatory publishers and journals based on recognition of their business model and lack of serious

editorial practices.<sup>[3-8]</sup> In January 2017, he shut down the blog and removed all its content from the blog platform. His recent reflection on his 5 years of experience with the blog does a fascinating reading even for the uninitiated.<sup>[9]</sup>

## THE DANGER OF PREDATORY PUBLISHING

Predatory journals charge an article processing fee to authors, yet do not provide the hallmarks of legitimate scholarly journalism such as peer review and editing, language enhancement, support by a credible, experienced editorial boards, physical editorial offices, and other editorial standards.<sup>[3-9]</sup> Consequently, these journals pose some new ethical issues in journal publishing. This new danger threatens the integrity of scholarly publishing. Internet-only "OA" publishing is a valid way for researchers to reach the public without a paywall separating them. However, of the thousands of OA scientific journals today, perhaps as many as 25% are considered fake, existing only to generate income by charging authors high-processing fees.<sup>[3-9]</sup> In such sham journals, peer review is either cursory or absent. The majority of submitted manuscripts are accepted may be simply by the return of post without any editorial comment. However, predatory journals can be remarkably good in their looks in this day and age of advanced information technology and presentation software. They may mimic reputable publishers by simple cut and paste methods. These journals do intentionally use names and logos that closely resemble those of legitimate journals. There are serious ethical issues around predatory journals and publishing in them. These problems include misrepresentation; lack of editorial and publishing standards and practices; academic deception; waste of research efforts and funding; lack of archived content; and undermining confidence in the research literature.<sup>[10]</sup>

## LOW AWARENESS OF PREDATORY JOURNALS

A search on the websites of a convenience sample of 11 general medical journals with OA search engine online from the Middle East and Africa was conducted manually. The search included Annals of Saudi Medicine, Ibnosina Journal of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, Lebanese Medical Journal (The), Libyan Journal of Medicine, Maroc Médical, Oman Medical Journal, Qatar Medical Journal, Pan African Medical Journal (The), Saudi Medical Journal, Sultan Qaboos University Medical Journal, and Tunisie Médicale (La). The search failed to detect any record to search terms of neither (predatory journals) in English nor (journaux prédateurs) in French. The only reference detected was its mention in the agenda of the sixth regional conference on medical journals in the

**Table 1: The increasing volume of work in the international literature on the threat of predatory publishing**

Year	PubMed	Google Scholar
2012	3	24
2013	2	89
2014	12	187
2015	33	275
2016	39	411
2017	58	293
2012-2017	147	1430

The records found in response to the search term “Predatory journal” in the PubMed and Google Scholar databases. (conducted on 16<sup>th</sup> July 2017)

Eastern Mediterranean Region held in 2015. Reportedly, the focus of the conference included OA and “predatory” journals.<sup>[11]</sup> However, no published position statement or formal proceedings could be found on the same site. On the other hand, African Journals Online (AJOL) is the world’s largest and preeminent collection of peer-reviewed, African-published scholarly journals. AJOL is a nonprofit organization based in South Africa. The website hosts 521 journals, including 218 OA journals. No records were detected in the journals by the same search described above. However, a report on the state of scholarly journal publishing in Africa based on a survey in 2013 was found.<sup>[12]</sup> About 74% of 185 respondents were not familiar with the concept and dangers of predatory publishing. A few respondents, however, expressed well-informed views condemning predatory journals.

## A WAKE-UP CALL!

The observations stated above suggest a noticeable lack of knowledge and appreciation on the part of editors of the seriousness of the danger of predatory journals on medical research. It can presumably be safely inferred from this deficiency of guidance that prospective authors are equally unaware of the threat of predatory journals. Formal evaluation was small and limited to Africa only.<sup>[12]</sup>

This editorial is a wake-up call for both prospective authors and editors. Students and young researchers, in particular, should be closely supervised by senior staff with knowledge and expertise in research and publishing. All submissions, as a rule, must be reviewed and approved by all authors and the target journal is carefully selected. When choosing a journal, following the criteria of genuine scholarly publications is crucial to avoid falling into the trap of predatory journals. When all matters are equal, publishing in an unindexed local or regional journal that is published by a local university, professional society, or even an independent group but can be verified and traced to its sources is a safer choice. This may be much more appropriate than striving to publish in an international-sounding journal. Those who fall for predatory journals are putting themselves into the risk of “publish and perish” rather than taking up the challenge of “publish or perish.”<sup>[13]</sup> Editors and publisher have heavy responsibilities on them to attract local and regional

and even international authors to submit to their journals. To this end, they need to facilitate easy communication with their journals’ websites and send prompt responses to authors with a friendly tone and content. The profession at large and reviewers in particular need to address the editors’ agony caused by delays in submission of peer-review reports with guidance to authors on how best address any deficiencies in their manuscripts. This requires a strong editorial machinery. The WHO East Mediterranean Regional Office lists 641 titles of medical journals in the region.<sup>[14]</sup> Sadly, 221 of these are interrupted publications. Consequently, it would appear much more logical that the number of such journals is reduced, but their activity and quality is sustained with a larger, more experienced, and fully functional editorial boards. These practices are likely to deprive predators from potential preys.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is vital and timely that the scholarly community in our regions joins the worldwide struggle against predatory journals. Authors, editors, publishers, and institutions should only support the legitimate scholarly research enterprise in the region primarily or elsewhere in the world at large. The choices can be appropriately made by the nature of the research or opinion being communicated and the audience being targeted. Such scholars and institutions must clearly and decisively distance themselves from predatory journals by not publishing in them, serving as their editors or on their editorial boards. Equally important, that senior physicians and scientists should not permit their faculty to publish in them knowingly and to guide them so that they do not fall into their traps. Finally, following the “think, check, and submit” advice remains wise and prudent strategy.<sup>[15]</sup> Furthermore, academic institutions should specifically exclude publications in predatory journals from supporting applications for career promotions.

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