“Deer Esteemed Author:” Spotting a Predatory Publisher in 10 Easy Steps
Posted on May 23, 2016 by stfmguestblogger | 4 Comments

If you read the title and had some idea what it meant, you have probably received a letter from a dubious-looking publisher, asking you to submit your work. Often, it comes with an appeal to your ego and probably left you with a sense of wondering if this was a real solicitation.

In short, that solicitation was probably not “real.” What does that mean? To use current parlance, it means that such an invitation probably came from a “predatory publisher.”

Predatory publishers\(^1\)\(^-\)\(^3\) are called as much because they:

- **Charge the author** to publish in their usually online-only journal.
- **Connect that charge to the publication decision** (this is key).
- **Do only a cursory review**, if any at all (and many can be easily “pranked” into accepting garbage)
- **Appear to be “legitimate” superficially** but will often not pass muster with promotion and tenure committees, agencies or accrediting bodies, or other interested parties.

It should be noted that not all “author-pays” models are illegitimate or predatory, and I will comment on that point further down. However, those that are will leave your paper “published” in a non-reputable journal that will not get you or your department/program the credit it needs. It also cuts off other publishing options and may leave you with a very expensive bill that may or may not have been fully disclosed at the outset. At the end, predatory journals are generally viewed as “vanity presses,” with the added problem that they take efforts to look legitimate from an academic standpoint, and authors do not realize they have submitted their work to a vanity press until it is too late.
E-mail solicitation is not the only way one stumbles across a predatory journal. It is just as easy to do a search for your content area, looking for a possible place to publish your manuscript, and have a number of predatory publishers appear in your search results.

The approach that predatory journals take can lure anyone. However, those who are fairly new (or completely novice) at publishing might be particularly vulnerable. Faculty with primarily clinical or teaching roles, community preceptors, and learners (including students, residents, and fellows) may all be particularly vulnerable. Another vulnerable point is when an otherwise experienced researcher, who may have produced publications in one context (eg, biological, clinical), switches content areas, and has to explore a whole new range of potential journals for possible submission. Think, for example, of someone who published several biological papers while doing a pre-MD master’s degree but is now looking for a venue for their first manuscript describing an educational evaluation or intervention.

In the interest of helping scholars avoid predation, I have listed out a description of 10 steps I use to weed out predatory publishers. While there is a lot of text below, in truth, you should be able to spot a predatory journal in about 30 seconds. Some, which are better at mimicking legitimate publishers, may take a bit of extra effort, but you should be able to evaluate most journals using these 10 steps in about 10 minutes.

10 Steps to Spot a Predatory Publisher

So, to begin your evaluation, ask yourself...

1. HAVE YOU HEARD OF THE JOURNAL?
Think about the journals you have actually heard about, seen, or read, just in your professional activities. Have you come across this title? If not, ask your colleagues. Has anyone heard of this journal before? This isn’t the only stopping point, but it should be the gateway question. If you have heard of a journal before, that is step #1.

Beware: make sure that the exact title of the journal you are considering is the one you have actually heard of. Many predatory publishers intentionally make sure that their journal titles sound a lot like those of well-established journals.

2. IS THE JOURNAL AFFILIATED WITH EITHER A WELL-KNOWN, LONG-STANDING PUBLISHER OR A PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY WITH WHICH YOU ARE FAMILIAR?
Non-predatory journals are often associated either with a publisher that you have probably heard of at some point (Elsevier, Springer, Wiley, etc). You have seen their logo or heard their name. Alternatively, other non-predatory journals are affiliated with a society with which you are familiar or of which you may actually be a member.
3. WHO SENT YOU THE INVITATION TO PUBLISH?
Does the invitation come from an actual journal editor, who should at minimum show academic credentials (eg. Jane Doe, PhD, Jack Smith, MD, etc)? Do you recognize the name? Beyond the individual who signs the invitation to publish (and occasionally, it will simply come from “Editorial Office”), what about the mailing address? Is the address for an office on a university campus, or does it look like a non-descript residential or business address?

Many predatory publishers will send invitations from an “Editorial Office,” or someone with no particular credentials listed, and/or there will be a name with credentials, but you won’t recognize the name at all, and/or the address looks like it could be a rented suite, someone’s home residence, etc. Most well-established, ethically operating journals will communicate via the editor, who will be a credentialed scholar in the field, with an editorial office located at a university or at least a well-known publisher.

4. DOES THE INVITATION YOU RECEIVED LOOK LEGITIMATE IN OTHER WAYS, SUCH AS...
Are you an “esteemed scholar?” Is there a very dramatic appeal to your ego? Does the letter describe something to the effect that, “We read your publication XXXX with great interest and think you can make an excellent contribution to our journal”—or words to that effect? Basically, if that is the case, your name has been phished out of some source or another (from a different publication, from your university’s web page, etc).

An extension of these concerns is an even more obvious ploy: is the request to publish even linked to the work you typically do? Are you an epidemiologist being asked to submit to an electrical engineering journal, for example? While predatory publishers have gotten better at this game, there are still occasionally e-mail invitations that go out with obvious mismatches between the journal’s supposed discipline and those of the person being invited.

5. DOES THE EDITORIAL BOARD LOOK LEGITIMATE?
The editor is not the only person involved in a journal—journals have associate editors, as well as editorial boards. Many predatory journals either make up names, include names of people who don’t even know they are listed, or rope real scholars into using their names, but those individuals go on to be suspicious of the journal and/or publisher quickly. One journal even used the likeness of an eminent-but-deceased British epidemiologist on its list of fake editorial board members. Additionally, the editorial board should match the journal content. Is the journal content supposed to be about primary medical care, for example, but the editorial
board has faculty from electrical engineering departments listed? (Not to pick on the electrical engineers....)
An extension of this concern—if the editor and board look suspicious, or you recognize names but don’t believe they are really involved in the journal, reach out to them. Write an e-mail. Do you get a response that indicates that, yes, this is a real journal, and that the board member or editor is actually involved, knows they are involved, etc?

6. IS THE JOURNAL INDEXED?
Most predatory publishers these days will make the attempt to make their journal appear as though it is indexed. In medical literature, the key place to look for is Medline indexing. This is distinct from PubMed. PubMed indexes Medline, but it is also possible to be included in PubMed in a number of other ways. Many predatory publishers submit their content to “PubMed Central,” which is supposed to act as an online repository for full text articles. PubMed Central then gets included in the PubMed search interface, but this is NOT the same as being indexed in Medline. For more information about what gets selected for inclusion in Medline, see: https://www.nlm.nih.gov/pubs/factsheets/j_sel_faq.html
It is also important to note that Medline inclusion is not the only criterion for quality. Some journals may be perfectly legitimate, but are not specific enough to medicine or health-related topics to warrant either consideration by Medline, or to warrant the effort on the part of the publisher to get it included. For example, there are business journals that may be interested in your manuscript on medical business, or social science journals, policy journals, etc, interested in some other type of paper, that aren’t indexed in Medline. Additionally, it takes about a year or two of operation to submit a journal for consideration in Medline. Legitimate-but-very-new journals may not yet be indexed in Medline but should have a statement to this effect on their website.

7. ARE “OPEN-ACCESS” CHARGES DISCLOSED UP FRONT?
Open-access charges allow the author to pay the publisher, who then allows free and open access in perpetuity to anyone who wants to read the published article. Several publishers operate extensively on an open-access model, and appear to do so in a legitimate manner, with very clear reviewing procedures, high standards, and up-front disclosure of fees. Additionally, the concept of purchasing open access for articles published in traditional subscription-funded journals has existed for decades. In other words, not all open-access is automatically bad. However, it IS bad, and very suspicious, if the fact that the author will get charged, and/or the exact fee amounts, are in any way difficult to find. If you stumble across this information in a place on a website, or in fine print, the journal is not operating ethically, just based upon that non-disclosure. If the journal has failed in many or all of the prior six steps, you should expect
that it is operating on an “author-pays” model, and if those fees aren’t immediately apparent, run in the opposite direction.

8. CHECK BEALL’S LIST NOTE: This list is no longer available

9. USE COMMON SENSE AND PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT
At the end of the day, what the first eight points describe are all processes that should resonate with what both your common sense and professional judgement are intuitively telling you. Conversely, a potential journal may fail many of these challenges on paper, but you may have other information that you can bring to bear about the journal, such as your professional judgement about some aspect of the journal or its editors that override the items described above. You should bring that sense and judgement into the mix.

10. IF ALL ELSE FAILS, ASK THOSE YOU TRUST.
If, after going through all nine points above, reach out to colleagues, mentors, respected members of your discipline, or even your mentees and students who might have a better handle on new developments (again, within the scope of common sense and professional judgement). Weigh your analysis of a journal against what they might have to say. It’s the final check against what could be a costly and regrettable mistake in engaging with a predatory publisher.

As long as we are talking about how to spot predatory journals, which generally operate on the open-access or “author pays” model, it also is useful to think about some open-access journals that are legitimate. Typically, those journals will have a very transparent review model. BioMedCentral (BMC), for example, operates on an open review basis, publishing reviewer comments and identities alongside the final article. This ensures that the journal does actually commit to a real peer review. Other examples of publishers or journals that appear to operate along ethical lines include Medical Education Online (and its parent, Co-Action Publishing), the Public Library of Science (or PLoS), and open-access journals created by established publishers like the British Medical Journal (BMJ Open), Springer Open, etc. Some problems have arisen with some of these journals that were described previously on Beall’s List, but none of these, in my opinion, operate in a “predatory” fashion.

As a final thought, publishing scholarship should never be entirely solitary, whether you are truly a sole author or not. Even the sole author has mentors, colleagues, and others who can offer advice. Anyone can start with item #10, in my list (“If all else fails, ask those you trust.”) Following these steps can potentially help avoid putting your good work into a journal that won’t be taken seriously and will end up costing you or your program money.

References


4 RESPONSES TO “DEAR ESTEEMED AUTHOR:” SPOTTING A PREDATORY PUBLISHER IN 10 EASY STEPS

1. Margaret Henderson | May 26, 2016 at 6:02 pm | Reply

   For 10 you could add, Ask a hospital or academic librarian. We keep on top of predatory journals and have access to resources to check into publishers.

2. Michael Fetters | May 31, 2016 at 8:51 pm | Reply

   Great commentary, must read especially when looking for venues outside of the mainstream journals.

3. Colleen T. Fogarty, MD, MSc. | May 31, 2016 at 9:16 pm | Reply

   Nice to see this in print! thanks much Chris! I only wish there were a way to filter these out via spam filters!

4. Emily Onello MD | June 9, 2016 at 4:33 am | Reply

   Thank you, Dr. Morley. I hadn’t been aware of predatory journals; your writing and the subsequent reader responses were very helpful and enlightening.