

Predatory Priorities



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Over the last few months, there has been a lot of talk about so-called “predatory publishers”, i.e., those corporations which publish journals, some or all of which purport to peer-review submitted articles, but publish articles for a fee without actual peer-review. The origin of the discussion can be traced to a list of such publishers hosted by librarian [Jeffrey Beall](#).

Irrespective of the already questionable practice of putting entire corporations on a black list (one bad journal and you’re out?), I have three main positions in this discussion:

1. Beall’s list used to be a useful tool tracking a problem that nobody really had on their radar. Unfortunately, Jeffrey Beall himself recently opted to [disqualify himself](#) from reasoned debate, making the content of the list look more like a [political hit list](#) than a serious scholarly analysis. It appears that this approach may still be rescued if it were pursued by an organization more reliable than Beall.

2. There are many problems with publishers that eventually need to be solved. With respect to the pertinent topic, at least two main problem areas spring to mind.

2a. There is a group of publishers which publish the [least reliable](#) science. These publishers claim to perform a superior form of peer review (e.g. by denigrating other forms of peer-review as “[peer-review light](#)”), but in fact most of the submitted articles are never seen by peers (but instead by the professional editors of these journals). For this minority of articles that are indeed peer-reviewed, acceptance rate is about 40%. Sometimes this practice keeps other scientists unnecessarily busy, such as in replicability projects or [#arseniclife](#). Sometimes this practice has deleterious effects on society, such as the recent LaCour or Stapel cases. Sometimes this practice leads indirectly to human death, such as in irreproducible cancer research. Sometimes this practice leads directly to human death, such as in the MMR/autism case.

These publishers charge the taxpayer on average US\$5000 per article and try to use paywalls to prevent the taxpayer from [checking](#) the article for potential errors.

2b. There is a group of publishers which similarly claim to perform peer-review but in fact do not perform any peer-review at all. Apparently, it seems as if they aren’t even performing much editorial review. The acceptance rate in these journals is commonly a little more than twice as high as in the journals from 2a, i.e. ~100%. Other than the (likely very few) duped authors, to my knowledge there are no other harmed parties, but I may have missed them.

These publishers charge the taxpayer on average ~US\$300 per article and do allow the taxpayer to check the articles for potential errors.

3. Clearly, both 2a and 2b need to be resolved, there can be no debate about that. Given the number and magnitude of issues with regard to infrastructure reform in general and publishing reform in particular, it is prudent to prioritize the problems. Given the larger harm the publishers in 2a inflict on the society at large as well as the scientific community, I would suggest to prioritize 2a over 2b. In fact, looking back over what little we have accomplished over the past 10 years of infrastructure reform, it doesn’t appear we have too many resources left to waste on 2b at this particular time. Moreover, if focusing on 2a were to lead to the demise of the journal container as so many of us hope, 2b will be solved without any further efforts.