

Navigating Through the Pressures of Publishing in an Era of Predatory Journals

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The old adage of “publish or perish” is becoming a reality at many research and comprehensive universities due to the justifiable demands of funding organizations for tangible returns on their investments. In response, the administrative hierarchies at many institutions have set high output targets in an attempt to garner more external funding, but which are not commensurate with the resources available to researchers¹.

This has manifested itself in the greater weighting of publications than teaching and outreach activities by promotion and tenure committees when assessing academic staff. Thus, junior faculty often engage in “salami slicing” of their scientific reporting to avoid the guillotine and graduate students see strong publications during their candidature as their only hope of landing a post-doctoral position, much less a faculty appointment².

Gone are the days when students hold back on publishing until they have attained a research position, instead many purposefully delay graduation to beef up their CVs. Publication pressure is more keenly felt in STEM fields, where journal articles are the major unit of currency, than in the arts and humanities where researchers are afforded more time and creative space to complete book projects.

open access scientific journals

This has created an opportunity for open access scientific journals with fast turnover times and these now publish approximately 11% of all articles, whereas they were virtually non-existent prior to the 1990s³. Titles like PLOS ONE have become major players as the number of articles this mega-journal publishes has risen from 138 in 2006 to 23,464 in 2012⁴. This level of output would not be possible without PLOS ONE abandoning the practice of considering the potential impact of a piece of work and instead

screening exclusively on scientific validity. Mega journals have turned to providing articles that use statistics and letting the field decide which works are groundbreaking, but this comes at a price to the author that can make all but the most well-endowed blink. Herein lies the rub. Mega open-access journals like PLOS ONE and scientific reports are often far too expensive for researchers in the developing world and as such, many are tempted by open access journals which offer little to no actual peer review but require a publishing fee⁵.

predatory journals

These entities have been labeled “predatory journals” characterized by their request for papers with impressive though annoying regularity and the prominence of “International” and “Global” in their titles. The persons behind these titles seemingly intentionally use titles very similar to more established ones and one of our anonymous interviewees at The UWI shared his shock at mistakenly submitting a paper to the *Journal of Agronomy* instead of the prestigious *Agronomy Journal*. The journal’s alarmingly quick acceptance time was the only sign that he was about to commit a grave error but one wonders how many researchers were as vigilant? Detractors of open access publishing often nostalgically look back at the pre-open access era but forget some of the issues plaguing the old guard. The bias of brand name traditional journals against authors from ACP countries has long been suspected^{6,7} and many of the researchers we consulted in preparing this article have shared instances when they received encouraging responses from reviewers only for the editor to deliver the dreaded news that “this work does not appeal to our readership.” Many traditional journals now offer an open access option and article turn around times similar to that of mega open

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access titles but at comparable cost. They charge high access fees for a product obtained and refined largely for free, which again hinders access to scientific information by researchers from ACP countries. This shows that there are swindlers on both sides of the divide and the administrators who set these lofty publication output targets must accept their responsibility to provide guidelines to help students and faculty navigate the minefield that is modern scientific publishing.

Norway is ahead of the curve in devising a “white-list” of approved journals to which research funding is linked, while Jeffrey Beall (an Associate Professor at the University of Colorado, Denver) has produced a list of suspected predatory journals and publishers⁸.

proposal

We propose a two-tiered journal ranking system where the first tier would consist of titles that offer peer review of acceptable quality while the second tier would consist of titles which are leaders in their sub-discipline as we believe it is important to recognize ground breaking work. This should be updated on a bi-annual basis with an appeals process for titles not previously assessed. Further, we advocate improving the visibility of UWI-aligned journals like *Tropical Agriculture* and *West Indian Journal of Engineering* by offering open access options.

From left to right: Renaldo Belfon, postgraduate student and Mark Wuddivira, lecturer



- ¹<http://www.dcsience.net/?p=5388>.
- ²<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/opo.12090/pdf>.
- ³<http://www.nature.com/news/open-access-the-true-cost-of-science-publishing-1.12676>
- ⁴<http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2013/06/20/the-rise-and-fall-of-plos-ones-impact-factor-2012-3-730>.
- ⁵<http://www.nature.com/news/investigating-journals-the-dark-side-of-publishing-1.12666>.
- ⁶Horton, R. 2000. Public Health North and South: Bridging the Information Gap. *The Lancet*, 355 (9222): 2231-2236.
- ⁷Yousefi-Nooraie, R., B. Shakiba, and S. Mortaz-Hejri. 2006. Country Development and Manuscript Selection Bias: A Review of Published Studies. *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 6:37. doi:10.1186/1471-2288-6-37.<http://scholarlyoa.com>.
- ⁸<http://dbh.nsd.uib.no/kanaler>.

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